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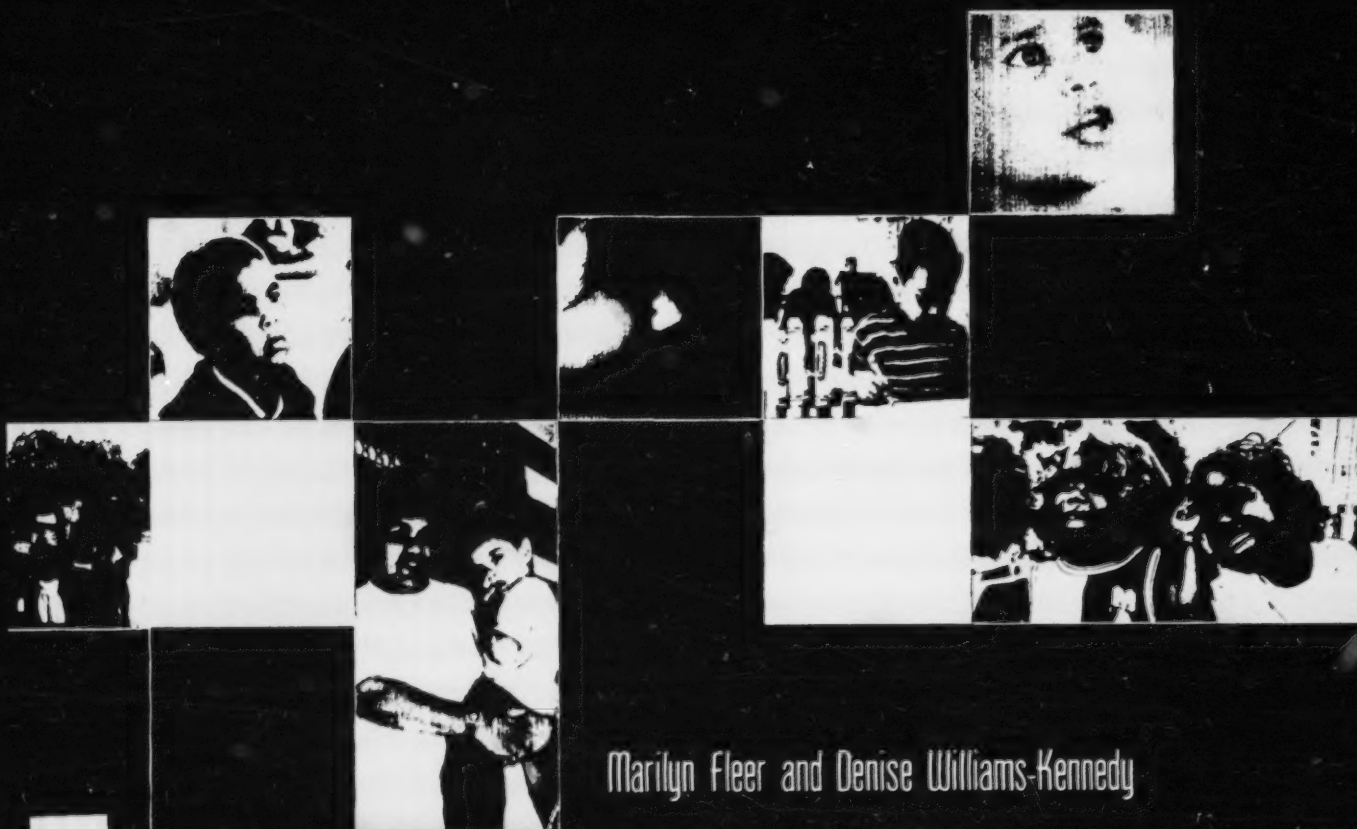
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ABSTRACT

Noting the need to support Western teachers in Australia in their quest to work with indigenous children in more culturally appropriate ways to close the literacy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous children, the "Building Bridges" project aimed to identify and record the key features of growing up as an indigenous child in Australia today. Participating in the project were six extended families and their associated community link people. The preschool-aged child in each family was filmed by their family over the course of 1 week, at home, in the community, and in preschool. The 6 edited tapes were then shared at a 1-week workshop during which time families discussed the videotapes with indigenous and non-indigenous early childhood experts. This book includes the narratives recorded on the videotapes, includes families' explanations for their video selection, and illustrates an authentic and culturally sensitive approach in cross-cultural research. Following two introductory chapters, Part 1 of the book deconstructs the schooling culture and discusses the need to make explicit the codes for participating effectively in schooling and literacy learning. Part 2 examines the multiple literacies evident in the family stories and gives examples of pedagogical practices that will make Western literacy explicit in the schooling context. The insights expressed by families are also presented to help teachers gradually push aside Western lenses and sharpen their focus on indigenous children's experiences prior to beginning preschool, child care, or school. The book's seven appendices list videotape content and present a profile of print literacy awareness and understanding. (Contains 21 references.) (KB)

Building Bridges



Marilyn Fleer and Denise Williams-Kennedy

Literacy development in
young Indigenous children

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Building Bridges

..... Dedication

This book is dedicated to the past generations of children who were not given opportunities to fully utilise and build on their own family cultural knowledge, skills, expertise, and wisdom.

Many non-Indigenous educators have travelled along familiar educational paths without seeing the other cultural pathways that traverse this land. Indigenous pathways have guided and connected Indigenous people across Australia for more than 40,000 years. In contemporary Australia, these pathways still exist, although they have evolved into many different forms. Indigenous families are the guides for those educators who are willing to leave their 'comfort zones' to discover these unique knowledge systems. This knowledge and understanding can be used to develop culturally relevant and inclusive educational programs. As such, this book is also for future generations.

Building Bridges

Literacy development in young Indigenous children

by Marilyn Fleer and Denise Williams-Kennedy



AECA: Voice for Young Children





Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. 2002

AECA: Voice for Young Children

The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) is a national peak non-government organisation acting in the interests of young children aged 0-8, and for older children in outside school hours care. AECA actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children and their families and supports the important role of parents in caring for their children. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services, and is also a specialist early childhood publisher.

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Foreword

Parents of Indigenous children, like all Australians, want their children to get a good education. The parents of Indigenous children want them to have the same range of choices and opportunities as are available to other Australian children. They want their children to be able to read, write and to apply meaningful understanding to the world in which they live, to be actively engaged in the learning process, and to make sense of their environment.

Building Bridges — Literacy development in young Indigenous children makes the connection between what parents and their communities see as important about what their young children know and are able to do, and the teaching and learning process in preschools. This book explores the nature of this relationship by drawing upon the intangible nature of cultural knowledge intrinsic to the context in which Indigenous children grow up and the nature of the school learning environment. This book describes the need to recognise the importance of this relationship to bring together relevant learning processes and teaching methods that will set the pace for better educational learning outcomes for Indigenous children.

The willingness and generosity of the Indigenous families who participated in this project should be highly commended. Their participation and input have provided concrete examples on the significance of the relationship between parents and schools in terms of positive learning outcomes for children.

Thank you especially the Australian Early Childhood Association for conducting this project. The challenge confronting us now is to bring about more innovative ways of bringing together cultural knowledge and learning with relevant and more appropriate teaching practices. Without improving the educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians, we will be a diminished people.

Dr Brendan Nelson
Minister for Education, Science and Training

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Section 1

Beginning the literacy dialogue



Chapter 1: The *Building Bridges* research project



This project began with the wisdom of Pam Cahir, director of the Australian Early Childhood Association (AECA), who saw the need to support Western teachers in their quest to work with children in more culturally appropriate ways. This vision was shared by Peter Buckskin from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), who has worked tirelessly to close the literacy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

Seven out of every 10 Indigenous students in year three are below the national literacy standard, compared to just three out of 10 other Australians. On average Indigenous students miss out on up to one day of schooling every week, compared to around just three days every term for other Australian students. This means Indigenous students are, on average, missing out on more than a year of primary school and more than a year of secondary school. It is not surprising then that some 18 per cent of Australia's 'at risk' youth are Indigenous. Improving the educational opportunities and achievements of Indigenous Australians is an urgent national priority.

(Kemp, 2000, in National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy, p.4)

Literacy is about human expression, communication, and interaction. School is the vehicle society uses to teach literacy skills and knowledge to children.

The complexity of what it means to be literate and how literacy is learned is still debated and varies within and across cultures.

(Barratt-Pugh, 2000, p.1).

Hill et al. (1998) argues that the literature shows clearly how:

- There is enormous diversity in home literacy practices among and within cultural groups.
- Rather than being literacy impoverished, the home environments of poor, under-educated, and language minority children are rich with literacy practices and artefacts.
- Although beliefs about literacy and its payoffs vary, marginalised families generally not only value literacy, but also see it as the single most powerful hope for their children.
- Even parents who themselves have limited literacy proficiency support their children's literacy acquisition in many ways (p.17).

Indigenous families, like most other families, want their children to get a good education. They want their children to read and write and be able to use mathematics, so that when they eventually leave school they will have more choices and better opportunities.

Indigenous families understand that gaining Western education is important for their children. However, parent participation in school is still a relatively new development for many of them. Furthermore, teachers and members of various religious orders have historically been seen by some Indigenous families as being solely responsible for their children's Western education. Therefore it is not surprising that many families don't understand how, why, or when they need to actively support their children in developing literacy and numeracy skills.

In an extensive review of the literature, Hill et al. (1998) suggests that:

- language and literacy learning is facilitated when there is a close match between home and school discourses;
- literacy involves issues of social justice, conflict resolution, and critical literacy; and
- social action and change in the hierarchical power relations in school, the early literacy curriculum, and between the school and community are on the critical agenda (p 22).

If parent participation is a crucial part of any child's education then this role has to be promoted by schools and, more importantly, understood and learned by

families. It may take time before this role becomes accepted as a family tradition and obligation. For Denise Williams-Kennedy (co-author of this book) the schooling experience was not always positive:

Speaking from my own personal experience, I could describe my primary and secondary schooling as a form of 'mandatory sentencing'. I didn't enjoy school. Sometimes I felt as if I was invisible. Other times I wished I were. For many Indigenous students like me, school was and still can be a place of criticism, shame and punishment.

Children and families need to see that school is worth attending and persevering with. They also need to believe they can gain access to the learning and educational opportunities that come with this perseverance and attendance. What is critical is that this belief starts when children are young. That is why early childhood education is such an important part of a child's whole-life education.

This is also the time when parents seem to feel more able to contribute to their child's education, because most early childhood centres welcome families into their programs. These are the places where families and educators can work together to validate every child's potential and begin to open up channels of communication.

An important factor which will influence the success of these emerging partnerships between families and teachers is the need to develop a common language so that both parties understand what the other is talking about. When people understand each other, they can really listen to what is being expressed and then make informed and culturally appropriate decisions which will support rather than hinder the educational progress of Indigenous children.

The process

Developing a common language was a fundamental principle of this project. The project began with six extended families and their associated community link people, to set about recording some key features of growing up as an Indigenous child in Australia today.

Indigenous preschool-aged children and their families from different regions of Australia were invited to participate in the study. The preschool-aged child was filmed, by their respective family, over the course of one week. Families video-taped their child at home, in the community, and in preschool, undertaking normal everyday activities.

A major aim of this project was to provide Indigenous families with an opportunity to act as central agents, selecting the valued cultural skills and knowledge exhibited by their children. Each family selected from the hours of

video-tape those aspects of their child's life which best represented to non-Indigenous people the significance of being an Indigenous child in Australia today. For example, Tahlia was filmed interacting with Grandma out in the bush and participating in group activities at her preschool. Gregory was filmed visiting his cousins, visiting the park, having a story read to him, gardening, and working under the bonnet of his uncle's car. Some elements of the children's activities were unique and culturally distinct, while other elements were common across groups and cultures.

The six edited tapes were shared at a one-week workshop held in Alice Springs. On the first day, family members shared with each other what they had filmed, discussing their selection and commenting upon what was important for them. Three key questions were:

- What can everyone see?
- What can only the family see?
- What can we no longer see because it is so much a part of our lives?

The questions were powerful in encouraging families to look more deeply than simply the content and to move towards an analysis of cultural content and context. This positioned the families as knowledgeable and valued members of the workshop—they were identified as having cultural knowledge that no one else could see and no one else could share.

On subsequent days the families, in small and large groups, discussed the video-tapes with members of the reference group. The reference group was made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous early childhood experts. The families discussed important elements in each video with this broader group. Through the repetition of sharing, family members built confidence and gained strength as new insights emerged over the course of the week.

The families' explanations for their selection demonstrated significant cultural diversity. Their comments have been detailed in this book alongside the explanations of each event shown in the videos. These narratives provide the reader with insights to differing cultural practices experienced by young Indigenous children in Australia today. These rich learning contexts provide a framework for thinking about the many forms of literacy that are possible. Literacy development in its broadest sense formed the basis for the selection of video material to share with Western teachers. The individual family narratives and their associated explanations lead to a better understanding of the cultural construction of literacy across groups.

Denise acted as a key facilitator during the family workshop. As an Indigenous woman, mother, and preschool teacher, her role was important in this cross-cultural context. She brought together the differing cultural understandings in ways which respected and valued individual contributions as well as building a sense of group cohesion and common purpose. She reflects upon elements of the workshoping process:

What happened as a consequence of family members acting as the central agents in the project was that families began to realise their own potential as researchers, teachers, communicators, and eloquent advocates for their families and their communities. They realised that they were capable of actively participating in educational discussions and were more than able to make informed decisions about the education of their children.

Families talked about their child, the schooling process for their child and themselves, the everyday, the special, and relevant elements of their culture. Most importantly, they talked about the significance of what they had captured on video. The reference group had to listen, to try and see through the families' eyes, and to understand. These discussions were important for helping non-Indigenous people understand the different perspectives on schooling and literacy development.

The filmed activities of each child within the family, school/centre, and community contexts were deeply understood by the family and, as a result, could easily be talked about to the group. Through using video material the family members found it easy to share their thinking about culture and literacy, as they were able to show their culture in action.

Researchers, policy writers, and teachers too often ask people to express complex understandings without the support of visual aids. Furthermore, they frequently act as the interpreter—watching, recording, and analysing, but never positioning those researched as the knowledge brokers (the ones to decide when and how the knowledge will be shared, and what it means). In this project, the families decided what data would be gathered and how that data should be interpreted—as they explained what was in the videos. All others had to work at trying to understand—to try and look through the parents' lenses.

The family members met as a group on the first day of the week of workshops. The families developed an understanding about each others' child, as well as an obligation to help each other share their insights with the reference group. This gave strength to the participants and legitimised their thinking as knowledge of value and importance.

In the process of sharing, different Indigenous groups reflected upon similarities, differences, and what was special about being Aboriginal. Cultural practices were analysed, named, and then used for further critical reflection. Families were able to identify cultural practices which were important for literacy learning and general schooling. They were able to indicate what non-Indigenous teachers needed to understand as they discussed culturally abstract ideas. However, it must be acknowledged that the workshop process can only ever share a portion of a complex and tightly-woven set of connected cultural practices. The family stories in this book provide a beginning point and not a full picture of literacy learning for young Indigenous children.

The process used by the project team represents a unique, authentic and culturally sensitive approach in cross-cultural research. The methodology can best be described as an 'inside-to-outside' approach to record important Indigenous everyday experiences. As such it has facilitated the gathering of some ground-breaking material which has the potential to make a significant difference in cross-cultural teaching. For instance, one outcome was the understanding that Western ideas of homework actively work against family obligations, since the family member (e.g. a cousin) who has the skill to do the task (rather than the child who is given the homework) is expected to do the work in the home environment.

What is also significant about this project is that each family and community group retained full control. Members of the family trusted the filming process, as they or members of their extended family did the filming, selecting what could or could not be filmed, turning the camera off when their child had had enough; and freely handed over the filming to other community members who know what can or cannot be filmed. In this way only agreed and non-sensitive video data were gathered. Family members could tape what they wanted non-Indigenous people to see about their child, their home, their community, and ultimately their culture. The families knew the purpose of the research and consciously acted as the knowledge brokers. This was their project as much as it was a DEST-sponsored AECA project.

Cultural perspectives

As authors we have equally contributed to the writing of this book—each bringing our own special insights from our own cultural perspective, as we tried to see through another set of lenses.

Both authors saw the video-tapes prior to the workshops. Marilyn Fleer, a non-Indigenous person who was used to analysing data, at first viewed the tapes through her own cultural lenses. She states:

It was not until the workshop, where the family members explained each tape, that I really learnt how to see. This was a powerful learning experience for me—one of many I experienced as a result of being involved in this project. My Western lenses were not useful for interpreting what I saw, as it did not get anywhere close to what was being presented on the tapes.

The intentions of the project were viewed favourably within the Indigenous communities involved. It was also seen as important for the broader early childhood community. Denise explains:

What the project says to me as an Aboriginal parent and teacher is that the AECA has undertaken this research because it believes that, within Indigenous families, there is an unrecognised and untapped reservoir of skill and knowledge. These cultural skills and knowledge are educationally compatible (between various forms of Indigenous education and Western/mainstream education) and can be drawn on to establish a flexible foundation which would enable Indigenous children to scaffold between their home and school cultures, and eventually beyond. The outcomes of this project also enable educators to develop and implement culturally inclusive programs which, with support from families, could lead to the successful acquisition of literacy and numeracy competence for young Indigenous children. Therefore, instead of focusing on problems (or treating Indigenous families as powerless 'victims' of Western education) an important aim of this project was to empower both families and teachers as advocates for young children, as well as finding and revealing a number of possible starting points and subsequent pathways to learning—particularly for literacy development.

We trust that what we as authors have tried to put onto paper—using the words of the families—will help non-Indigenous teachers begin to see. We have much to learn about cross-cultural teaching. The insights the families expressed in the first part of the book are presented to help you gradually push aside your Western lenses and sharpen your focus on young Indigenous children's experiences prior to beginning preschool, child care, or school.

Chapter 2: Listening to us



Dadirri: Listening to one another

Dadirri. A special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is an inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is like what you call meditation.

Dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened.

We are not worried by silence. We are at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons. We don't mind waiting because we want things to be done with care.

Our people are used to the struggles and the long waiting. We still wait for other Australians to understand us better. We have spent many years learning the European people's ways; and we have learned to speak their language; we have listened to what they have to say. This listening and learning should go both ways. We would like people in Australia to take time and listen to us. We are hoping all Australians will come closer. We keep longing for the things that we have always hoped for, respect and understanding.

(Miriam Rose Ungenmerr)

This book is about listening to the stories of Indigenous people from all parts of Australia—from urban communities in Adelaide and Sydney to the Central Desert and Arnhemland. The diversity, but also the sameness, is reflected in the stories presented in the forthcoming pages so that you may go beyond a Western view of the world and Western schooling practices. As Miriam writes, we ask all non-Indigenous Australian teachers to take the listening role through reading the stories in this book. We then encourage you to reflect upon the stories and begin to develop better understandings of Indigenous peoples and respect what their children bring to the teaching-learning context.

You are also invited to journey through the range of world views and thinking that are presented. You are encouraged to pause and reflect throughout the book. Although the exact words of the families and reference group are mostly used in the book, we as authors have also directed your thinking through the use of a 'shared understandings' icon. The icons are simple markers on the pages that direct your attention to particular points you should give more thought to as you read each section.

The stories of the families provide a series of real contexts that will help to demystify Indigenous world views, school learning, and literacy outcomes for young Aboriginal children growing up in Australia today. Begin by considering what you know about each of these areas, and what you understand and take for granted when teaching young children.

WHAT I KNOW

What do I know about the lives and experiences of the young Indigenous children I teach? How do they spend their time?
What do their families value?

What do the families believe is important for their children to learn?
How do they learn best?

What sort of literacy experiences have they had?

What is my belief about how literacy learning can best develop?

Keep your notes with this book, so that you can go back and reflect upon earlier thinking as you engage with the family stories.

WHAT I NOW KNOW (after reading this book).

Most parts of the book have questions that help direct your thinking and capacity to make the most of this publication. These questions are designed to establish

what you understand at the onset, to provide a base from which you can work, and to prepare you for the critical reflection that will be needed to move your thinking forward. When you reach the end of the book, return to your comments and consider the journey of thinking that has taken place. You may like to add your own narrative to the text as you engage with the family stories.

Cross-cultural teaching, like cross-cultural research, requires a great deal of energy and skill in trying to move into another cultural framework—and you may never get there. But the rewards of connecting with and beginning to see with another set of lenses will be great for you and the children you teach.

Your own personal experiences will influence how you interpret the stories. Record some relevant experiences here. The questions below will guide you in this process.

COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS

Think of a word, phrase, or visual image which best describes—

- Your own experiences of primary and secondary education
- Your experiences as a teacher in an early childhood setting or in the community
- What you think literacy is and looks like in practice.
- Your understanding of Indigenous literacy.
- Who names, owns, and controls the different forms of literacy in our community. (These different forms will be demonstrated through the family stories—you should come back to this question).

You are encouraged to add to the text your own knowledge of the multiple literacies that children in Australia possess. You should also think about how some forms of literacy are not recognised in our schools and centres. Standard Australian English (SAE) is not only the dominant form of literacy, but it is the literacy with the most power. Proficiency in SAE is highly valued in schools. As you read the stories, consider the power structures that maintain and position SAE above other forms of literacy and the consequences of this domination on children who are not proficient in its use.

For example, Hill et al. (1998) states:

Individuals move across various sociocultural fields where divergent knowledges, skills, disposition, social relations and linguistic practices are

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differently valued. The capital or resources of an individual may be valued in the local community group, but this capital may be in competition with institutional values. For instance, a child who has been socialised to use a particular verbal uptake in the home community may find this is at odds with school practices (our emphasis; p.26).

Notions of domination and power are prevalent in many forms of schooling and literacy. For example, Hill et al. (1998) in citing Delpit (1988) argue that:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power (i.e. there is a 'culture of power').
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those that have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of or least willing to acknowledge its existence, while those with less power are often most aware of its existence (Hill et al., 1998, p.29).

It is not that teachers deliberately sanction one form of speaking above another; rather it is their acceptance of the dominant modes of communication that hinders their capacity to see the power structures inherent in language acquisition. Teachers from middle-class families are less likely to see the power they hold because they are proficient in the use of dominant language. These issues are discussed further in other sections of this book.

A toolkit for teachers for working with families is provided at the conclusion to the book. It provides a practical guide for tooling up families and teachers as they work together to provide the best possible learning experiences for young Indigenous children. However, an understanding of the tools can be gained only through reading the families' stories. The toolkit cannot be viewed as a fixed formula. It is only with an understanding of the particular family or community that teachers and families can select the best tools for the job.

The aim of the first part of this book is to give some insights into the lives of six Indigenous children from different parts of Australia, so that you may begin to understand the:

- diversity of Indigenous cultures in Australia;
- multiple literacies these children already process;
- importance of family, obligation, interdependence, and the extraordinary capacity of Indigenous children; and
- need to listen to Indigenous families and re-think the schooling structure and process.

The first part to the book actively deconstructs the schooling culture and discusses the need for making explicit the codes for participating effectively in schooling and literacy learning. The second part examines the multiple literacies evident in the family stories and gives examples of pedagogical practices which will make Western literacy explicit in the schooling context. Barratt-Pugh (2000) suggests six elements of a sociocultural view of literacy:

1. Children learn about literacies and how to 'do' literacy through participating in a range of activities in their family and community.
2. Literacy practices are carried out in culturally specific ways and contribute to children's developing sense of identity.
3. Children have different understandings about what counts as literacy and how literacy is done.
4. Literacy practices are carried out in specific ways for particular purposes.
5. The pattern of literacy learning differs between children, as they become relative experts within different literacy events.
6. Literacy practices are valued differently in different social and educational contexts (p.5).

To begin the listening process, we ask you to examine your cultural lenses, wipe them, and begin to look in new ways to the messages contained within the stories of the families.

Introducing the families

Sharon Blakney (Kori-ann's mother)

I was born and bred in Sydney, but I think of Cabbage Tree Island near Lismore as my home. That's my mum's country and we are Bungulung people. Ever since I was young we visited our family back there and that's why I still have a strong connection with that place. I believe it is very important that my children also maintain strong links to my mother's country. I want my children to get a good education. Parents are the main role models for their children, no matter how educated or uneducated they are. All families have an important role to play in the education of their children.

Victoria Lovegrove (Gregory's mother)

I was born in Meningie on Lake Albert in South Australia. The first five years of my life were spent in another small town called Raukkan on Lake Alexandrina. After that time we moved around a lot between Adelaide and Murray Bridge. I went to many different schools and I didn't get a good education. Often I felt as if my teachers didn't listen to me and I didn't know the right questions to ask to get the educational support I needed. Children have more educational resources and opportunities now. I want my son to be able to get a good education because I know education is important.

Jannette McCormack (Tahlia's mother) and Gloria Hillman (Kyle and Dylan's mother)

Jannette and Gloria are related to each other and are both Arrernte women from Central Australia. They believe strongly in the need for their children to gain an Indigenous education as well as a Western education. As Jannette comments in her story 'two-way learning is making them one person'.

Jannette is a qualified teacher, but both women have worked for many years in schools as support workers. Jannette hopes that 'all non-Indigenous people have a better understanding of our diverse Indigenous society'.

Gloria believes that teachers need to really listen to Indigenous children to hear what they have to say. Her message to teachers is for them to 'enjoy working with our children and they will enjoy your guidance and company'. When Gloria and Jannette work with children in schools they like to treat all children as if they were their own.

Najwa Richards (Shannon's mother)

I am a sole parent with one child, Shannon, aged five. I was born in Whyalla and brought up in Adelaide, where we currently reside with my parents and four nieces. We are descendents of the Narrunga people of Point Pearce, York Peninsula, the Ngarrindjeri of Raukkan on Lake Alexandrina, and the Adnyamathanha people of the Flinders Rangers in South Australia. Education is a tool that Shannon will need to get on in life. I will support and encourage him in whatever way I can.

Rosalind Djuwandayngu (Miranda's mother)

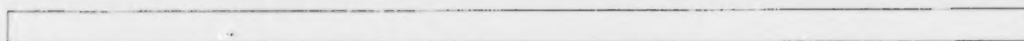
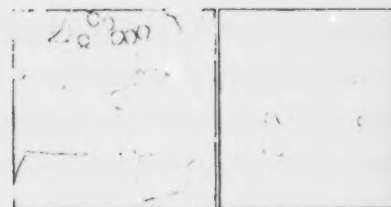
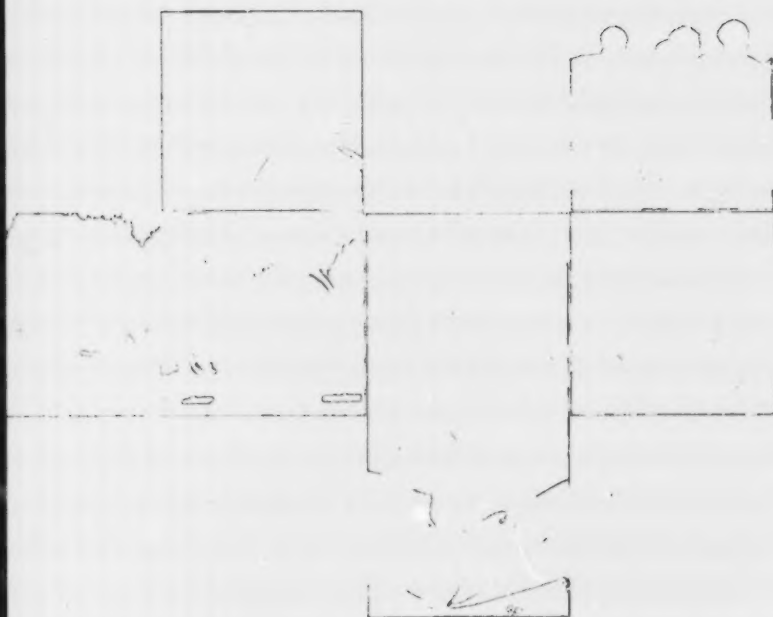
Rosalind is principal at Milingimbi Community Education Centre in north east Arnhemland. Her teacher training was undertaken through Batchelor College and Deakin University. She has worked extensively in bilingual and bicultural education for many years. Rosalind is a Yolngu-matha speaker with a large extended family who still maintain a strong connection to their Yolngu language and culture.

Laura Agius

Laura was the community link person for Najwa and Victoria's family's in South Australia. She actively supported the parents and contributed to the discussions during the workshop. Laura is of Ngarrindjeri and Nurrunga descent. She has worked across all levels of education for many years as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Worker. Her initial involvement with education began when her children first started school.

Section 2

The family stories



Chapter 3: Two-way learning is making them one person



Janette and Tahlia's story

Digging for honey ants

Janette explains and others contribute



That's my country

Tahlia is five years old. She is sitting on the ground under a tree with her grandma, sister Kiesha, auntie, niece, Gloria, Kyle, and mother Janette. Three non-Indigenous people are part of the group: Leanne with her two children.

Janette: That's part of my country, where I grew up (one hour's drive from Alice Springs). We go there on weekends and during the holidays. We have land on the side of the mountains (gestures with hands towards the southern side of the MacDonnell ranges). That's where we belong.

That's someone's mum

The family walk around in the bush. Grandma pokes a crowbar into the dirt occasionally, and eventually settles on one location and begins to dig.

Digging for honey ants

Janette explains and others contribute

Janette: That's a part of my other family. And that's me carrying Tahlia and that's my mum (with the crowbar). We are looking for honeyants. Gloria and her kids are there, too. Even though they are little, they are learning their family kinship. Learning names of plants, animals, family too, and how they are connected to family, who's who in the family. She got to know. It gets really complicated.

Denise: I was thinking ... 'that is someone's mum' ... We say it all the time; when we talk about someone, we talk about their relationship to someone else. We don't speak the name, but rather the relationship.

Janette: They use their skin names, too. Not just your name—English name, Sharon: Where you from? If it is a black fella we ask you, and you talk about where you are from—rather than using the English name. You make a connection straight off. We may say 'We know all your mob'.

Denise: Family relationship is not immediately obvious; but all of them (shows with arm movements) are related. Sometimes we don't know the kid's name, but we all know the family—that's so-and-so; you don't need the name, but you need the connection. But as a teacher you need the name for the roll!



Talking language

Janette has Tahlia on her hip and is walking around the area, then settles next to Tahlia's grandmother. Some conversations are heard in Language.

Janette: My mum speaks Language to Tahlia all the time. She is now starting to talk back. She teaches others, too. She shows Leanne's two children (non-Indigenous children). When we go out back, we teach animal names and things. When Tahlia grows up she will need English and Language. If she is like me, then she will need both.

Digging for honey ants



Grandma as teacher, parents as disciplinarians

Grandma has a crowbar in her hand and is digging a hole in the ground. Digging occurs for 40 minutes. (Very little discussion is heard).

Grandma continues to dig while the family members move about. Tahlia moves the dirt Grandma takes out of the hole to one side. The children sit and watch the activity, occasionally moving around.

Janette walks with the children over to a nearby tree and picks up a bush coconut. She places it on the ground and cracks it open with a rock. There are discussions in Language. The inside of the bush coconut is shown to the children. The children watch and listen.



She is not just wandering around
The children walk around and return to the family sitting next to a one-metre deep hole.

Janette explains and others contribute

Janette: Grandma has a teacher role; parents are more of the disciplinarian. You see it in town. Grandparents take over. She was always the one to teach them to do things. Same with the country and the Language. That role is still there—another thing we take for granted.

Janette: There—she is explaining to them what is good and not good (bush food).

Janette: When people see her they think she is just walking around. She is not just wandering around; she can find things for herself. If she finds something she comes back and shows us and tells us. Non-Indigenous people think that we just go on a bush trip; they think we just go out and have a picnic. They don't know that we teach them things. We let the kids go out by themselves, exploring. It's giving them a chance to do it; they then come back and show us that they found these (gestures with hands). They explore and learn things too, instead of us just putting it into their heads; they enjoy sharing with their friends; they talk about their knowledge. They have got to learn both ways—*two-way learning is making them one person!* In our Indigenous preschool (Yipirinya) they get both.

Digging for honey ants

Janette explains and others contribute



Our children know

Leanne's daughter (non-Indigenous) looks into the hole: Grandma pauses and then continues digging. Tahlia speaks in Language to Grandma.

Janette: Tahlia is saying in Language: 'She shouldn't do that; that's not what you do'. The Lore says you don't look in the hole while you are looking for the honeyants. Our children know that; they learn that as babies.



Stories tell us who we are

After 40 minutes, Grandma takes out several honeyants from the hole. All the family members suck the sweet fluid from the base of the honeyants.

The family, including the children, re-group in a circle under a tree. Grandma smooths an area of sand in front of herself and Tahlia. Grandma speaks in Language, marking the sand as she speaks.

Janette: That's my mother. She is telling her (Tahlia) a story in Language. It is about her country and her family.





Shared understandings

Two-way learning is making them one person

That's my country—that's where we belong

That's someone's mum—roles and relationships connect our people

Talking Language is important to us

Grandma as teacher, parents as disciplinarians

She is not just wandering around; she's exploring and learning

Our children know about Lore and culture

Stories tell us who we are through our kinship and our country



When Indigenous children come to preschool they can already talk and listen. Many know how to read the land. They come with understandings of links between the land, people, and learning. People wonder: What are the symbols the children read? Where are these symbols? These children already know to look to nature—nature is the writer, creating shapes and renewing the environment. Many Indigenous people will say:

Our children are a part of nature, and therefore we are the symbols of nature too. We read ourselves, we read our families—in order to work out where we belong, who we belong to, and what our roles and obligations are to each other. Our children already know how to read the connections between people, land, and Lore. This is one part of the learning cycle. When our children go to childcare, preschool, or school, they learn how to record and retrieve their knowledge using another set of symbols. Some of us have more than one or two ways of thinking and learning. Our lives are richer when we have more than one way of reading the world around us. Two-way learning is making us one person in Australia today.

All young children already possess reading process competence

Indigenous and non-Indigenous children read the world all the time. Young children try to make sense of their environment by interpreting the visual cues that particular cultural groups have framed for them and expect them to know. Infants learn to interpret hand gestures, facial expressions, relationships with family members, artefacts (e.g. pictures, toys, books, digging sticks) and environmental features (prominent landmarks). Although different cultural

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Literacy lenses

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.

Members of the Reference Committee share their thinking

Jenni: In terms of language, children have learned how to interpret gesture; how to read and operate in context—'we don't talk while Grandma is teaching'; how to learn through independent exploration; how marks in the sand are a narrative for my country and my people. The new protocols of 'school' need to be made explicit.

Patsy: When children learn language, their focus is not primarily on the language itself but its use as a tool to help them do something else. Interaction between adults/children and children/peers/siblings using language is essential. Language learning is a social activity. This way of learning begins from birth, continues in the family/community setting, and ideally into the early childhood settings outside home. Children learn best when there are lots of opportunities to share ideas and skills, talk to each other, learn from each other, and work together in a collaborative way. Teachers need to have a very flexible approach to time and listen actively to the children in order to scaffold their learning.

Kathy and Fran: Children learn to read the environment/seasonal changes, totemic paintings/symbols, sign/body language from a distance.

Laurie: Literacy is now seen very differently than in the past. We now see literacy as beginning at birth and including listening, talking, reading, writing and, increasingly, visual literacies such as technological literacy and drawing. We look at literacy as sets of social practices, carried out differently by different groups of people at different times and in different contexts. There are many 'social semiotic' systems; ways of encoding and communicating meaning in social contexts. Adopting this perspective helps early childhood educators approach literacy in an inclusive way, valuing the many practices experienced by children in their homes and communities.

Children represent things using words (written and spoken), music, art, movement, mathematical symbols, dramatic play, blocks, or computers. All of these representational media are developed within cultural contexts. For instance, well-known researcher and author, Howard Gardner, suggests that there are eight intelligences (linguistic, logical, musical, spatial, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist), and possibly a ninth (existential), which can be considered the 'modes of representation that homo sapiens have'. A similar concept is found in the Reggio Emilia notion of the 'hundred languages' of children. In the Reggio Emilia philosophy, representations of meaning in different 'languages' are seen as affording children deeper understandings.

Experiences with multiple representations appear to help children in different ways. First, such experiences help them to find the representational forms that best suit them. Second, experiences with different symbol systems enrich children's ability to construct meaning and to understand their world.

Maree: As teachers we need to recognise the importance of Indigenous children learning together. Doing things together is not cheating—we need to provide opportunities for children to continue their learning in this way and recognise when they are ready to do things on their own.



Video link: See Appendix 1

Chapter 4: They are not just individual kids; they have obligations to each other



Gloria and Kyle's story

Family obligations: They are not just individual kids, they have obligations to each other

Collecting bush coconuts

Gloria explains and others contribute



We expect them to work by themselves

Kyle (aged 5 years) and Dylan (7) are climbing the incline that butts up against Gloria's back fence. They move about examining the ground. Eventually they find a bush coconut and climb back into their yard through the hole in the fence.



Dylan begins banging the bush coconut with a small stone. He calls to Kyle to fetch a larger stone.

Gloria: This is the back of my place. The kids have made a hole in the fence so they can go out the back.

Den: Are they collecting those nuts?

Gloria: Yeah.

Gloria: His big brother tells him what to do and Kyle just goes and does it. He has gone to get a rock for Dylan. Dylan is having a major role, with Kyle following. That is common; that is the way things are.

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Collecting bush coconuts .

Gloria explains and others contribute



Kyle walks back to Dylan, but is then directed through non-verbals to get a bigger rock. Kyle returns with a 10cm boulder and gives it to Kyle.



Negotiating with children



Working on your own means your failures are highlighted



Homework is a whole family obligation

Gloria: Kyle was getting bigger rocks for his brother; looking for his brother for some non-verbal approval; so he continues with that way of doing things.

Janette: We (schools) expect a child to work by themselves, they are not just individual kids; we disadvantage them.

Denise: In schools all kids have to work by themselves; they just play up, as the teacher is not willing to cater to their need for working as part of a group—the teacher is often not willing to negotiate with them.

Gloria: If you put a child on their own, you focus on them, give them the attention. Then they succeed or fail, if they fail on their own you highlight that failure.

Laura: The children do their homework together—it is an obligation. For example, my Gail does the words and her brother does the illustrations.

The interactional behaviour displayed between Kyle and Dylan is important to Gloria. Siblings are expected to develop close and supportive relationships. Older children look out for younger children, and younger children learn how to support the efforts of older children. For Gloria, this is an important interactional pattern she expects and facilitates. The building of family obligation is further illustrated in the next sequence of family interaction.



△ Dylan ties one shoelace, then Kyle tries to do the other—Dylan watches and is there if needed

Family obligations: Quiet time, to let the other child catch up

Tying shoelaces

Gloria explains and others contribute



Kyle is sitting on the floor, trying to do up his shoelaces. Dylan waits at the door. Keisha (older sister) is in the room.

K: *(Puts foot in shoe)* Like that, hey Keisha? How you do them *(crosses over ties)* turn around.

Keisha: Umm.

K: Like that? Now what *(holding laces firmly)*? Which way? Now what? I done this all by myself.

D: *(Stands at door and looks).*

K: Like that *(tries to do a knot)*. Mum, my lace. I know how to tie it. I couldn't do it.

G: Oh, you are clever.

D: Do you want a double knot?

Gloria: Kyle is doing his shoelaces; he is telling his bigger sister how to do it and Dylan is watching from the door; and Kyle asks can you show me; then he asks the questions, and Dylan is showing.

He (Dylan) is very patient, too.

When they are close like that they don't use a full sentence 'Double knot, hey?' They know what they mean.

Tying shoelaces

Gloria explains and others contribute



K: Do you put that through there, Keisha? Is that what you did Keisha? Like that, now this? Keisha look.

Keisha: Yeah.

K: I can't do that; can you do all the rest for me?

Mum: Dylan, can you help Kyle?

K: I tied up my lace, hey?

D: Yep.

K: 'Cause that's how you do your laces, hey?

D: Yep.

K: Can you do a double knot?
(Dylan moves over and does up Kyle's shoelace on one shoe only).

D: I am; that's why I am waiting.

K: *(Puts on shoe).*

(Dylan stands by observing as Kyle attempts to do the shoelace up his on second shoe.)

K: So that is the left foot *(pats left shoe).*

D: Yep.

K: So that is the right foot *(pats right shoe).*

D: Yep.

Gloria: He (Dylan) is now giving him the opportunity to do the other shoe; but he is keeping an eye on him.

Sharon: He is so patient while he is waiting for him to do up his shoe; other kids would say 'I want to go now', but he just waits.

Tying shoelaces

Gloria explains and others contribute

K: Can you do this please? I don't know how to do this lace.

D: Cross (*begins moving laces over each other*) over (*crosses at this point*), under (*takes lace and feeds underneath*). (*Dylan quickly bows and then knots the laces*). Can you do double knots?
(*Kyle watches*).



Sharing knowledge is not cheating

Denise: In a school context, sharing knowledge with family members in the classroom is not cheating for Indigenous children.

Laura: I shared knowledge when I was at school and the teachers used to think that when I used to help my cousin in the classroom that I was cheating. The teacher used to think we were all cheating, just because we were all helping each other, but really that's a cultural thing—if you know the answer then you really need to share it; and it works in opposition to competition because the aim is for you to share what you have got and not to keep it to yourself. See, if you look at competition it is an individualistic thing, you are really competing against other individuals; with sharing, you are sharing with everybody; it is a different way of doing things.



Sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend

Sharon: In school, children didn't want to feel too different and didn't want to not fit in; they are so sensitive to another child's needs; they look like they are sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend; our kids are so unselfish in that way.



Catching up to where they are

Laura: The children need a quiet time to let the other child catch up to where they are. Gail worried about the other kids, but didn't let anyone else know that; she was beyond where they were. The teacher talked about how Gail helped other kids.



Shared understandings

Family obligations: They are not just individual kids; they have obligations to each other person

We expect them to work by themselves—but they have obligations to others

Negotiating with children may help them to learn

Working on your own means your failures are highlighted

Homework is a whole family obligation



Family obligations: Quiet time to let the other child catch up

Sharing knowledge is not cheating—it's looking after your family and friends

Sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend—means you understand that your friends need your teacher's attention

Catching up to where they are—means family/friends are not left behind

Teaching from a community rather than an individual perspective

Many Indigenous children come to preschool or school as a family rather than as an individual. Many of these children have experiences which have taught them to value working together, to be self-sacrificing for the common good, and to see tasks as the responsibility of the group. Schools/centres which foster working together recognise the strengths of these Indigenous children.

Working as an individual—for learning and for assessment—is a particular cultural construction. Historically and globally we see many other cultures which view themselves as team players (e.g. in some countries, such as Italy, where in the Reggio area preschool programs feature easels set up to support group rather than individual painting).

Social cohesion and a sense of social responsibility are traits which are highly valued—particularly in communities where survival means working together. Children learn at a young age how to read each other and how to work together.

There are many facets of working together that may not be considered by teachers who are not Indigenous to Australia. In the family stories so far presented we find

Organising learning with an individualistic perspective rather than a community orientation ignores, rather than builds upon, the children's capacity to read each others behaviour patterns. As teachers we need to acknowledge interaction within communities, and include it as an important element in successful cross-cultural teaching. Then we can truly support the notion that the children are not simply a group of individuals, but children who are closely knitted together through their cultural obligations to each other. We can value the children's capacity to read human behaviour, demonstrating children's established reading process skills. Further discussion on the implications of these cultural practices for teaching is presented in subsequent stories in this section of the book.

Now put on your literacy lenses. What can you see? Write down your ideas.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines, typical of notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Members of the Reference Committee share their thinking

Jenni: Kyle is skilled in reading the power relations and protocols of context—when big brother says do, you do. He expects feedback on how he's doing with tasks—a nod or smile will do. He doesn't need elaborated forms of expression to communicate in close situations; school expects you to make your meanings elaborated and explicit. Teaching, in his experience, is by modelling and practice, not being told and left to do it, or having someone take over.

Kathy and Fran: Learning literacy is a collaborative social process rather than an individual activity. Reading process skills such as knowing how to interpret family and community members' behaviours are evident.

Laurie: As early childhood educators move from a Piagetian perspective to a Vygotskian perspective, group work and the evaluation of group processes is more valued and early childhood staff attend more closely to the role they play in helping children to contextualise their learning and in scaffolding that learning. However, the mind shift required to do this shouldn't be under-estimated as the developmentalist perspective is reinforced by the individualistic focus of Western society as well as Western schooling. A recent professional development resource designed for early childhood staff in NSW outlines a method in which early literacy is developed by staff and families working in true partnerships in which both staff and families are seen as possessing specialist and complementary knowledge. It advocates that early literacy should be developed on the basis of shared information between staff and families about literacy values, experiences, and practices (Jones, Diaz, Arthur, Beecher, Ashton, Hayden, McNaught, and Makin [forthcoming]).

Maree: Learning by watching, asking questions—using spatial language (over, under, etc.) to clarify process; using language going through the process helps embed knowledge for next time.



Video link: See Appendix 2

Chapter 5: Learning about the libraries in our heads



The Milingimbi Mob: Djuwandayngu and Miranda's story

Our library: Everyone can learn and everyone can teach

Crow dance

Djuwandayngu explains and others contribute



Adults and children are standing on the shore near the water. To the right are people playing the didgeridoo and the clapping sticks. The grandmother dances. The children participate. The children then dance on their own.

Djuwandayngu: That's the crow dance. The children recognise the beat to the song—music is sometimes like a role model. I just get up and dance, and they hear the music; they identify the songs and the music with the dance. Most of them are cousins and immediate family. That's how Aboriginal children learn through other families; other families are responsible for them and learning.



Some of the children do not perform the dance as intended. Auntie gets up and shows the children a particular part of the dance.

Djuwandayngu: Auntie was showing the kids what to do.

Najwa: All family members take responsibility for teaching the kids; everyone does it. Some family members are good at dancing, so the mother doesn't have to do everything.

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Crow dance

Dujwadayngu explains and others contribute



Making learning explicit

Denise: An important part of the learning-teaching process is making explicit what the children are expected to learn; and then providing opportunities to practise.



Children are not punished for making mistakes

Sharon: When the children didn't do it right, they sort of had a laugh at it and then they were off doing it again; instead of talking about it they showed them how.

Janette: The children were not punished for making mistakes; they can make mistakes and it is seen to be part of the practices. In mainstream schools we tend to put children down for making mistakes; you can't do that. They sort of had a laugh at it and then they were off doing it again; instead of talking about it they showed them how. In schools they are often shamed for having the wrong answers.



Even the young are included

Karen: There is an expectation that even at a young age children can pick it up, learn it.

Gloria: Learning through other family members; it is about group learning; learning in a group; when the little tiny one comes up, the adult's reaction is different. In Western communities when tiny tots come up in school, they frequently say 'go away', but here the tiny tot was included. Even though they were not the focus group being taught, the tiny tot was still included.

Najwa: When someone is talking there is an acceptance of everyone's contribution without judgement.

There is a belief that everyone can learn and everyone can teach.

Crow dance

Dujwadayngu explains and others contribute



Doing and talking

Denise: There wouldn't be a lot of talking, but rather a lot of doing. It is interesting how in school we do a lot of talking about it and less of the doing.

Djuwadayngu: Sometimes we talk Language, sometimes English. Sometimes we don't talk, being quiet too; these are important to us; we use English, it is our way too.



We are the ancestors of our children

Janette: For the future, when Miranda grows up; then she passes that down to her kids a way of preparing for the future; teaching kids and showing them the way, so they can teach their kids; we are the ancestors of our children.

The crow dance is a valuable opportunity for young children to engage in real rather than constructed cultural activities. Young children are expected to participate in cultural activities, performing what they are able to do within the group, during the full performance. As children are able to tackle more steps in the dance, they are given the space to do so—with the adults gradually withdrawing their support, or simply performing alongside the children. Where children need greater assistance, the adults simply demonstrate the steps without judgement. For Miranda, learning is about participating in real tasks and reading the body and musical cues that are important elements of the crow dance. In the next scenario, learning within a school context is detailed.

Our library: Learning about the libraries in our heads

School context

Dujwadayngu explains and others contribute



A non-Indigenous teacher is sitting on a chair, surrounded by a small group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. The teacher reads a book on spring in English to the group and invites participation. There is a section in the text discussing blossoms.

Najwa: With the Western teacher at the front reading the book on blossoms, the non-Indigenous kids were interacting more than the Aboriginal kids.

School context



In a second sequence, the same group is being taught by an Indigenous teacher. The teacher is sitting on the floor with the children and speaking in Language.

Dujwandayngu explains and others contribute

Sharon: The non-Indigenous teacher was sitting up straight in the chair; the Indigenous teacher was on the ground at the children's level, she (the non-Indigenous teacher) was signalling that the children are inferior to her; she is up there and knows everything. If the non-Indigenous teacher went on the floor, then the Aboriginal kids might pay more attention to her.

Najwa: Although the Indigenous kids were fidgeting, they were listening.

Gloria: The Indigenous teacher kept talking in Language, as that was time for Language. It wasn't just interaction, they were really engaged, they looked keen, joined in and were keen to be a part of it. All the kids were really keen; even the non-Indigenous kids seemed also to be joining in; they didn't speak English; they were listening.

Janette: Because it is their culture, they want to learn more about it, 'cause it is their culture rather than the 'blossom stuff'.

Kathy: However, sometimes children don't look like they are listening—for example, in the community we do find times when people hold meetings and adults may well not appear to be listening—but are in fact listening!

Denise: There are other things that I noticed in relation to their own Language; they were learning about grammar, how to put words together, but also how to write the Language.

School context

Dujwandayngu explains and others contribute



Mixed messages

Laura: Teachers are often giving off stiff body messages; those little ones know that. When I want my kids to stop doing something, then I do a freeze movement (*shows stiff body*). I have noticed that many teachers sit with a stiff body in front of the children. Our kids are getting mixed messages. They read it the way they always read it: the teacher sits still in front of the children; they use body language but the teacher forgets about the messages their body is giving. The children read the body language and they listen to the words—they then get mixed messages. Some children will turn away; body is saying a different message to the words, so the child turns, and doesn't see the body, so that they can concentrate on what's coming out of the teacher's mouth.

Karen: (*Reading book*) The kids are looking away, they are listening, but they are turning away, so that they can understand; when you listen to music you don't have to look at the stereo!



Schools equate looking with learning

As a teacher, it is expected in teacher training courses that behaviour management means all looking to the teacher. Teachers measure their success as rated against what is happening with kids; these kids are not learning if they are not looking, as they equate looking with learning.

School context

Dujwadayngu explains and others contribute



Reading the body

Laura: The child's journey began a long time ago; when they were a baby. Education doesn't start when they get to school; they learn those signs; they use hand signals as they're talking; they read your body; and they read the country. We use hand signs; they are powerful.

Vicky: We teach our children to communicate. Babies cannot talk but they can understand signs. Children learn how to behave from babies—this is taken for granted because they begin so young.

Janette: Children recognise and understand what those symbols mean, even babies do, e.g. (makes hand gestures) meaning what's happening? (makes gesture with finger) or where are you going? People don't talk, they just signal; you got to be observant to see what they are doing; children learn how to behave from babies.

Kathy: All cultural groups learn, but it is what they learn that is different. We need to know about what learning is valued by particular cultural groups.



Reading the mind through feelings: When 'yes' means 'no'

Denise: When you ask parents something about their children or can they do something, they will say yes, and I look at them and I ask myself what does that mean? Yes, I will do it or yes, you are being polite to me? They won't say no to me because that is being impolite; but I can usually work out when they mean yes and when they mean no. We have all got feelings and you know when someone is feeling uneasy (they are thinking no), so they may say one thing but actually they are meaning something else; they are not trying to confuse you, not trying to be bad-mannered, they just don't want to offend you.

School context

Dujwadayngu explains and others contribute



Reading the land

Janette: Reading to us is what we read in the land — read the tracks, we know where the tracks are going.

Gloria: This is something you take for granted, reading the language, footprints, what made that track.

Children are keen—they want to know—'Was it a big snake, or little one?'—children take note.



Reading stories

Karen: Stories tell us who we are, and tell us about our culture. They connect us to each other and to the land.



You can't see the library in our heads

Denise: For Western people reading is about books and libraries. For Aboriginal people it is in our head; you can't see it, the library is in our heads.

Karen: There is an Aboriginal system of literacy; we don't think about it, our children are always judged by a non-Aboriginal system of knowledge. Our children know how to talk, how to listen. The Western way is to judge children firstly by how they read and how they write; rather than understanding the system of knowledge, which may have a different sequence.

Vicky: Spelling—Indigenous languages were not written down—oral tradition. Because Indigenous language wasn't originally a written language, people didn't need to worry about spelling. When you got an oral tradition, spelling doesn't matter; you just write the words the way they sound.

Kathy: Many languages are now being written or have been written down. As a result, we see an emergent literacy tradition for some Indigenous languages.



Shared understandings

Learning about the libraries in our heads

Our library: Everyone can learn and everyone can teach

Making learning explicit helps children focus on the task of learning

Children are not punished for making mistakes—mistakes are part of learning

Even the young are included—everyone is part of the family

Doing and talking—we use many strategies to learn

We are the ancestors of our children—we have to prepare them for the future

Being creative—at home our children improvise and experiment



Our library: Learning about the libraries in our heads

Mixed messages—our children read both verbal and non-verbal language

Schools equate looking with learning—and non-Indigenous teachers equate paying attention with learning

Reading the body—children learn body language from when they are babies

Reading the mind through feelings—we have to use our intuition sometimes

Reading the land—we read nature's symbols and signs as part of our culture

Reading stories—connects our people with our land, our culture, and our history

You can't see the library in our head—our culture has evolved from 40,000 years of oral history and traditions

Everyone can learn and everyone can teach

Listening and learning is a two-way or even multi-way process. Everyone can learn and everyone can teach. Often, families are the educators at home while teachers are the educators at the school/centre. Both roles are important to successfully raise

and educate children in Australian contexts. In some regions, community elders often teach in the school or oversee younger Indigenous teachers.

Educators at home and at preschool or school need to develop the ability to listen to themselves and others. Although effective communication is a universal need, in an Indigenous context listening means that you provide people with adequate time to speak, and you don't interrupt or immediately impose your own view or interpretation on the speaker. What you can do is wait a while, then ask for clarification. Once educators learn how to listen, they will learn a lot about their own methods of communicating, and about the children, their families, and other people.

Sometimes our assumptions about how, when, and why others listen and learn are inappropriate to the people or the situation, and consequently both parties misinterpret what the other is communicating. This is when communication and learning processes break down—especially when teachers do not give enough time to listening.

Often preschool or school educators forget that listening to students and their families is a two-way process and they tend to second-guess and skim over information or to dominate discussions and conversations. What this behaviour says to families is that their knowledge about their own children and education is not valued by the school/centre experts. Families may then withdraw and become sideline supporters instead of active and knowledgeable participants in the education of their children.

Learning about the libraries in our heads

Listening is also about finding out the different types of literacies children bring with them to school. Many Indigenous people would argue that:

When non-Indigenous people listen, they learn about the libraries in our heads. Indigenous libraries are packed with different literacies.

(Denise)

There are many different forms of literacy. Western school literacy is important, but it is only one way of communicating among many. Many Indigenous children are learning about literacies which feature body language, which concentrate upon the natural environment such as the seasons and the associated animal and plant cycles, and which examine animals' and humans' interaction with the environment, such as when tracks are left. These literacies represent a library of knowledge that many Indigenous children learn and store in their minds. When this knowledge is ignored or, worse, at odds with their schooling experiences, the children often suffer confusion and a reduced sense of self—as their literacies are not valued, often not recognised, and certainly not built upon in classrooms and centres.

Literacy lenses

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Members of the Reference Committee share their thinking

Jenni: Narratives take many forms—music, dance, visual art, speech, as well as written-down stories. High expectations, coupled with clear modelling, demonstration and practice (showing, not telling) engage learning; scaffolding by more experienced learners enables the novice learner to gradually take over a task with confidence and discover what they know and can do. Many kids in school spend energy learning the social discourse, not the literacy one. These children have high-level symbolic knowledge (the essence of literacy)—reading and using, gesture, body language, signs, signals, symbols, marks and tracks.

Laurie: There are many implications here for pre-service teacher education and for in-service/professional development. When literacy includes listening and talking as well as reading and writing, cross-cultural communication training including areas such as body language becomes imperative. The benefits and the importance of bilingual/bidialectal learning, multiliteracies and literacies in languages other than English should be part of all language and literacy subjects, not relegated to the periphery as an optional extra, as is often the case.

Maree: Developing a relationship with children is critical—one that respects. Children very quickly sense when there is no respect.



Video link: See Appendix 3

Chapter 6: Classrooms as families



Sharon and Kori-Ann's story

We don't all express our identity the same way

An Aboriginal dancer
paints the children's faces
at preschool

Sharon explains and others contribute



Kori-Ann is at preschool. A visiting Aboriginal dancer is outside with the children, painting their faces and arms. Some children look on. Kori-Ann turns away and holds onto the adult's leg.

Sharon: My girls were scared when they were painted up like that. Not all Aboriginal kids know their culture.



We don't all express our identity in the same way

Sharon: Aboriginal people don't all do the same things—don't know all there is about Aboriginal people. We don't express our identity in the same way; so because of it, we don't know everything that there is to know about Aboriginal people; we don't fit stereotypes because we are all different.

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**An Aboriginal dancer
paints the children's faces
at preschool**

Sharon explains and others contribute

Denise: Aboriginal people are a very diverse group themselves. In the remote areas, Aboriginal people had contact with explorers more recently. As a result, some groups have maintained their traditions, culture, language more strongly. On the coast of Eastern Australia (and some southern and western coastal regions), Aboriginal people had contact earlier on—which explains why many people don't speak their own languages. Aboriginal people across Australia express their identity differently. Our culture doesn't have to be a traditional one.



**You can't judge us by what we
look like**

Sharon: Stereotyping is a problem. We all don't have didgeridoos, and we all don't speak the same language—but people think that. And we are all not the same colour; we are all different colours.

Denise: We have mixed with lots of other nationalities; we are the United Nations of the world; that is why it is hard to tell, to identify us, because we aren't what you expect. You can't judge us by what we look like but, rather, it is how we feel and who we identify with.

Vicky: It is not what you look like, it's how you feel and act. Teachers need to acknowledge children for who they are and not put stereotypes on them.

Although teachers in early childhood education would argue that getting to know children as individuals is elementary to working with them, there is sufficient evidence to support the view that even teachers bring to the teaching-learning process their preconceived ideas and views about people. Many people think of Indigenous peoples as one group. In the story of Kori-Ann, it is clear that Indigenous peoples express their identity in many different ways. As teachers, we need to be open to learning about how a particular child and their family express their identity. The more open we are, the more likely we are to identify significant cultural literacies.

Who is taking care of them?

Lunch scene



Kori-Ann is at preschool. All the children are seated at a long table, eating their lunch. The children are buzzing with excitement and conversation.



It takes a whole village to look after a child



Who is taking care of them when they are at school?

Sharon explains and others contribute

Sharon: Now they are having lunch. We also got three cousins at the school, beside them two they got three.

Sharon: The family looks after the child, not just one person, but all the people in the family. It takes a whole village, not just the parents, but the whole village to look after a child. Big families have help everywhere; the preschool does that bit of the day; not just teaching them; teachers are not thinking like that; ways of including them and making them feel like it's the whole family. There is only one adult in a preschool or classroom; at home there are lots of adults and older children to look after them. It is the teacher's responsibility when they are in their care; they are also raising the child.

Laura: In schools, most Indigenous children are taught by non-Indigenous teachers. If you send your child to some other place that isn't your usual place, or part of where your family usually goes, who is going to be taking care of them? Are they going to be responsible for them? Are they going to care for them in the same way as your family would? Can they do that? Often it is hard to do that if you are sending your child to a strange place; often teachers are strangers to Indigenous people; you don't know anything about them; if they tell you, how can you entrust the most valued and important person to you to a stranger? That is who your teacher often is, unless they are someone from the local community.

Denise: That is one issue I think about at school (Indigenous school); we focus on it, we all try to work together, so that people are familiar, and try and build that sense of trust.

Lunch scene



When you don't know anyone,
you feel lost



We all grew up looking after
each other



Men and boys have a lot to do
with babies

Sharon explains and others contribute

Vicky: They belong to that group and feel important because you belong. Go somewhere where they don't know anyone and you feel lost.

Sharon: We take our families for granted, we assume they will look after our family—that is how it is. Family first.

Vicky: Family should look after family. We know our family to be there but don't expect it. Unwritten obligation. It is understood. Little kids will look after the babies. They will look after them. But we shouldn't. We all grew up looking after each other. We like learning around our cultures.

Laura: My 17-year-old son rang and asked to look after his sister's new baby, come and help care for the baby; he actually asked could he come up; men, including boys, have a lot to do with babies; they are not afraid to carry newborns, they want to play with them. You don't see it as much in Western ways.

Najwa: That is why everyone is responsible for children, including males, not just the grandmothers and the aunties, but the males as well; except of course for traditional ways, such as men's business and women's business.

Sharon: Some things we just live—and don't realise it is different from other cultures.

Lunch scene

Sharon explains and others contribute



Who in the family is the significant caregiver?

Denise: Who in the family is a significant caregiver? Who introduces the child into the environment? The significant caregiver may be a grandmother, aunt, or close relative other than the child's birth parents. Sometimes older siblings look after the younger kids; they come and get the kid from school. If they are sick they tell me; they make sure they get on the right bus.

Sharon: I don't go to teacher-parent nights; I just go any time, when I am dropping him off; if I can't go Mum goes; but some teachers will say 'where's the mother?' That is one great thing about my school, they understand.



One teacher eye and one mother eye instead of two teacher eyes

Karen: I was thinking we need better teachers. We need teachers with one teacher eye and one mother eye, instead of teachers with two teacher eyes.



Shared understandings

Classrooms as families

We don't express our identity in the same way

You can't judge us by what we look like

Who is taking care of them when they are at school?

It takes a whole village to look after a child

When you don't know anyone, you feel lost

We all grew up looking after each other

Men and boys have a lot to do with babies—males are not frightened of babies

Who in the family is the significant caregiver?



The sense of family exhibited by many Indigenous groups was quite evident in Sharon's story. The need for schools and centres to adopt this view of family in organising schooling is very important to many Indigenous families. The importance of all members of the group to look out for each

other needs to be recognised in schools and centres. There should also be recognition of the predominance of extended families.

Classrooms as families means that the teacher not only supports learning, but also looks after the children as a parent would. That is, the teacher would have a parent eye and a teacher eye, rather than two teacher eyes.

School thinking has tended to foster an individualistic world view—'look after yourself'. It is evident in program planning—for example, an important goal usually recorded in teaching programs is helping children to become independent. Yet an Indigenous perspective would tend to work towards interdependence. Concentrating upon independence and neglecting interdependence would disadvantage some children.

Children who have not experienced an individualistic lifestyle may find it difficult to meet teacher expectations and ways of behaving in classrooms and centres, since looking out for other group members is something that parents will want to see continue at school.

In schools and centres there are only a few adults to look after children. In Indigenous families, when adults are unavailable to care for their children, older children take on this responsibility. But this is at odds with the Western school culture's views of childhood, and Indigenous children's skills in making decisions for themselves and younger siblings are not considered at school. Teachers need to re-examine this attitude. An example of how teachers may draw on their students' social skills is given in this observation from Denise's seven-year-old son:

My son recently asked a question that had been puzzling him. He asked, 'Mum, why is it that kids at your school (an independent Aboriginal school) are allowed to tackle when they play football, but we can't tackle at our school (a small suburban mainstream school)?' I explained that many children at my school are related and therefore they know how to look after each other. These children believe that their relatives and friends wouldn't deliberately hurt them because they are only playing a game—football. They also understand that if they don't play properly, i.e. without care for others, then their peers won't want to play with them. However, at my son's school, the teachers are concerned that children might get hurt if they tackled each other, so the school makes rules to keep children safe. My son still didn't think this was fair.

Diversity of cultural practices among Indigenous groups should be viewed as the norm by teachers—but we have seen little recognition of this diversity in schools and centres. Many non-Indigenous people have tended to lump all Indigenous cultures into one group and have labelled them as Aboriginal or in some

In cross-cultural teaching, it is important to consider the multitude of Indigenous cultures around Australia or even in classrooms. Recognition of this diversity means that, in each group of children taught, teachers will not assume that a child will follow the same cultural practices as a child in a previous year or group. Recognition in this context includes trying to find out more.

Now put on your literacy lenses. What can you see? Write down your ideas:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Members of the Reference Committee share their thinking

Jenni: We can't work together to raise the child unless we take the time to know the family in all its intricacies. Without this knowledge, it's hard to teach literacy, or anything else.

Laurie: The culture of childhood in Australia has some elements that transcend ways in which children's knowledges/experiences are different and which may provide other bridges into literacy. For example, the inclusion of 'viewing' as part of the definition of literacy opens the door to the use of popular culture such as Disney videos or Pokemon or Barbies. These are often denigrated by teachers but of great interest of children. They can be motivational. They also offer opportunities to begin developing critical thinking. The approach advocated in this publication puts pressure on early childhood staff who already experience conditions and pay that are far from ideal. Also, most staff work in multicultural services, not bicultural services. A strong recommendation needs to be that management must accept the value of the development of partnerships with families along with the provision of practical support; i.e. release time, to assist staff to make the necessary connections. The time it takes to build connections should be valued as highly as the teaching of lessons.



Video link: See Appendix 4

Chapter 7: You have to know the questions to ask



Vicky and Gregory's story

You have to ask questions and you have to know the questions to ask

Helping Uncle fix the car

Vicky explains and others contribute



He always asks questions

The bonnet of the car is up, Gregory is sitting on top, to one side. Two uncles are working on the engine—Barry and Erol. Gregory is asking questions while they are working:

Gregory: Barry, what is that?

Barry: It is a hose clamp. I have to change it and put this one, a new one on; it's no good.

G: Is there anything in there?

B: There is water in there.

G: Is it new one?

B: That's the old one; this is the new one.

Vicky: Here is where Gregory is asking a million questions. I have always told him, he is not going to get any answers unless he asks questions. And he always, always asks questions.

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Helping Uncle fix the car

Vicky explains and others contribute



Gregory watches.

G: Why did you put them over there for?

B: With these two clamps the hose can stay on.

G: Put the new one on now? And that's the old one?

B: Yes, it is no good any more.

G: No. Hey, Uncle Barry.

B: Yes.

G: What is that thing for, that blue thing? There.

B: They are the spark wires.

G: Why they gone through
(*pointing to the leads*)?

B: 'Cause they have to go all the way to the spark plug.



Vicky: See Barry putting them in there. They start the car up, see the holes (spark plugs).

G: Oh, them holes. Uncle Barry, why these for?

B: That's for heater and air condition.

G: But you can touch it?

B: Yeah.

V: Yeah, now you can, but not when it is hot.

G: What is this for, Uncle Barry?

V: That's the radiator, that's where you put the water in to keep it nice and cool.

Helping Uncle fix the car

Vicky explains and others contribute



How patient he is

Denise: That cousin—how patient he is —
Uncle Barry!

Vicky: He's looking at the engine. Gregory fires all these questions, Gregory says: 'Why is this hard? What does it do?' Barry gives short simple answers about what each part is for. If you saw it, you would want to say to Gregory 'That's enough', but he keeps on.



When Vicky was at school

Vicky: When I was at school, I didn't learn the things I wanted to learn because I was too afraid to ask the questions or didn't know the questions to ask. I never learnt the things I wanted to know; I was worried about spelling or reading or something like that. I never asked or questioned as a child; so I want Gregory to be able to learn things by asking questions, so that he can learn things by asking questions.



The traditional way

Laura: My grandmother, she believes you don't ask questions, you should just watch and listen. In some communities you only watch and listen. In some communities it is bad manners to ask too many questions. I was always taught by my grandmother that you don't ask questions; you watch and you learn. You don't question things; copying rather than asking questions.

Denise: A good example of that could be seen in the families at Milingimbi. The kids are dancing and you see that kids don't ask questions about what to do next. The auntie is doing the dancing and the kids have to copy what she is doing, and even if they have got it wrong, they don't say you have got it wrong; they just show them again what they should be doing. They are not punished for doing it the wrong way, they are just shown how to do it properly; it is different to schools.

Helping Uncle fix the car

Vicky explains and others contribute



Times are changing

Laura: This is how it has changed from the traditional way; asking questions is more usual in the urban settings; it's changed, because people know that if they want to learn things they have to ask questions. But for some, if you are still living a traditional lifestyle you can still learn by watching.

Kathy: All cultural groups change over time—cultures are always evolving.



Sometimes teachers assume that they know what to do

Denise: Kids need to be able to ask the right questions to get the right answers. For example, if you go to the doctor, you won't be able to find out what is wrong with you unless you ask the right questions of the doctor. That is tied in with teachers needing to have a shared understanding with children, because sometimes teachers assume that kids will know what they want them to do or want them to learn, but the kids may not understand what the teacher really wants them to be doing; so teachers should make it clear what they want them to do or learn. Teachers need to give the big picture first and then the detail comes out later; what you actually do is fill them up with all this information and knowledge, so they have it all inside them; and then you draw out the little bits that you want to focus on. Teachers also need to explain briefly why the children are learning.



Shared understandings

You have to ask questions and you have to know the questions to ask

He always asks questions—this is how he learns about the world

How patient he is—all family members help to raise children

When Vicky was at school her teachers didn't try to understand her

The traditional way is at the centre of our diverse cultures

Times are changing—no culture is static

Sometimes teachers assume that children know what to do—
teaching should be more explicit



In order to find out about how the world works we need to interact with it. For some this means asking questions. Not all cultures and families use questioning in the same way or as the central way of finding out about the world. Not everyone has the same family experiences of asking questions, and some have only a short history of experience of asking questions within the Western schooling context. Effective questioning requires knowledge about the types of questions to ask and when to ask them. Teaching these skills to children means that they do not have to guess how this particular way of interacting with the world. In schools and centres, question asking is central to the process. When this style of discourse is examined by the children, as a subject for learning in its own right, then the guesswork in effective participation in schools/centres is removed.

In Vicky's story it is evident that she did not know how to play the question-and-answer game when she was in school. As a result, she actively coached Gregory to ask questions and to learn about what sorts of questions to ask.

As teachers we need to be mindful about the interactional pattern evident in schools and centres today, and remember that this may not be familiar to all children from all cultures. It takes some children a very long time to learn that non-Indigenous teachers:

- will ask questions they already know the answers to;
- ask questions to find out what you know;
- ask questions to keep the conversation going;
- ask questions as a social greeting (e.g. 'how are you?');
- ask questions when they really don't want an answer (rhetorical questions);

- use questioning as a link between ideas and activities in the classroom or centre;
- use questioning as a control technique;
- use a variety of question types (e.g. why, when, how, who); and
- expect children to ask questions and to know how to do this.

From a traditional Indigenous perspective, asking lots of questions would be considered impolite and not necessary, especially when interacting with strangers. Many Indigenous people take time to get to know strangers because they believe developing relationships is a gradual process of developing mutual trust and understanding. They need time to see for themselves what this new person is really like and how he/she behaves and relates to others in the local community. There is no need for lots of questions because a person's actions speak louder than words.

Questions like 'why?' may not be appropriate in some Indigenous communities. The use of this type of question would mean that the Indigenous child was questioning both the role and authority of another family member within their kinship system. These roles are defined by Indigenous society; taught by families and learned by all family members. These roles are respected in order to maintain a harmonious and peaceful society. In addition, not all information/knowledge is available to everyone in some Indigenous communities. Members of a community may have to wait until they are ready or entitled to learn specific knowledge.

Another reason some Indigenous children may not ask 'why?' questions is that within their own families and communities they would use other ways to gain meaning and understanding. These might include watching, listening, imitating, and talking to other family members (or specific family members).

Educators need to be aware of factors that may influence an Indigenous child's use of 'why?' questions in their classrooms, and they need to model and explain the purpose and use of such questions within schooling contexts. This may mean reflecting upon how teachers use questioning in the teaching-learning process. For example, research by Makin (1997) has shown the importance of educators being aware of the way they use questioning and the consequences of only ever using some forms of questions for non-Indigenous contexts. Recognising what sorts of questions we ask is an important first step in actively planning our interactions in the teaching-learning process. Makin (1997) has suggested that some questioning may appear as merely a 'display' of interest rather than 'genuine' interest in what the child is thinking, knows, and believes. If a teacher

is actually seeking information to which she/he does not already know the answer she is showing genuine interest, as opposed to asking display questions such as 'what colour are your new shoes?' While display questions may well begin a conversation with children, they add very little to understanding and effectively using questions to enhance cognition.

Regular self-analysis of teacher-child interactions provides a better understanding of assumptions, expectations, biases, or recurrent practices. For example, in Makin's (1997) research on adult-child interactions she has categorised interaction into at least four groups. She states that children can be commanded:

- To be (e.g. to be good);
- To act (e.g. 'go and get it');
- To attend (e.g. 'look at this one'); and
- To cognise (e.g. 'now you have to decide') (p.5).

Makin (1997) suggests that it is possible to gain some idea of whether teachers' conversations with children are reflective and thoughtful or if they predominantly focus on commanding children to be, act, attend, or cognise. Makin's research also indicates that there are different levels of responses required of children during adult-child interactions. For example, some interactions are absolute: there is no room for children to negotiate (e.g. 'glue it here!') Interactions may also be context-bound: specific to the immediate situation. Often little opportunity is given for children to think about what they are doing in relation to the wider situation; e.g. 'This frog looks like the frog we saw in the dam.' Here insight is offered by the adult in the form of supportive information (Makin, 1997, p.3-8). Finally, interactions can be temporally focused. For example, interactions which relate to the 'here and now' (such as 'What are you doing?') versus interactions which deal with past or future events ('Do you remember when?' or 'What will we be doing tomorrow?').

The active coaching of question-asking as demonstrated by Vicky is an effective way of increasing children's use of language in oral and future written contexts. Further discussion and analysis of question types, as illustrated by Makin (1997), will significantly add to children's literacy repertoire, particularly where teachers actively plan questioning into their programs.

The *question-answer interactional pattern between teachers and children* is a traditional way of working in most schools/centres—but it is assumed as the norm. Children who come from cultural backgrounds where questions are asked will fit into this way of working relatively easily. However, for children who have not experienced this interactional pattern, it will take some time. *Such children are*

Literacy lenses

[illegible]

Members of the Reference Committee share their thinking

Jenni: This is all about questions! How to let children formulate and ask their own questions—what, how, and why questions. Being allowed to make mistakes and learn from them—never reinforcing failure. Kids need to learn not only what questions to ask in school, but when and how to ask them. This is learning about context, purpose, and audience—key aspects of literacy learning.

Laurie: The need for explicit teaching is an important part of literacy learning for bilingual/bidialectal children who need to know what is expected of them, how to 'do school'. These areas need to be discussed with families so that both staff and families understand each other's practices and accept the need for children to be able to operate effectively in different contexts. Staff might consider how they can offer children opportunities to practise these new speech patterns; for example, 'playing school' in a centre set up to encourage this.

Patsy: Children learn language when:

- they are immersed in it;
- it fulfils their own needs and purposes—both individual and in order to belong to the group;
- others trust that they can learn, understand the developmental nature of language learning, and expect that they will learn to talk, read, write;
- all attempts to communicate are taken seriously—they receive positive responses to their attempts and others respond to the meaning;
- their approximations are accepted and adults model correct language use of whole language in their response;
- they get the help they need when they need it.

Maree: Naming objects, asking question to clarify thinking. Watching, listening, imitation, and talking.



Video link: See Appendix 5

Chapter 8: Families are very relaxed at home



Najwa and Shannon's story

At home: We all speak the Lingo!

Lunch scene



A bit of Lingo is important

The children are in the car, waiting to go to school and preschool. They wave goodbye and give their farewell greetings in Language.

Najwa explains and others contribute

Najwa: The children are saying goodbye in Lingo. Back in Adelaide, we don't have the full-on Lingo; just one word here and there. However, I still like Shannon to know those words. It is important to me and to the family.

Sharon: When you go to another community and the people use full-on Lingo, you know they are your people, but you can't understand them. It makes you feel strange (laughs).

Najwa: 'Cause I take it for granted, you say just a few words; we do it all time.

Gloria: Janette is actually my auntie, she has the Language really strong, and I don't have that. Western society has had that sort of impact. We need to keep it going, keep it strong.

Najwa: Teaching a bit of Lingo is very important.

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Lunch scene

Najwa explains and others contribute



Don't be judgemental about our language

Sharon: Language comes from the home—don't be judgemental about our Language. Aboriginal English—this is something that the kids bring with them from home, and teachers should accept the Language that they bring with them, because they are only young and that is the way they are going to learn their Language; that is what is familiar to them and teachers should not be too judgemental about it. Teachers can model Standard English, but they should not criticise kids for Aboriginal English.

Kathy: Some teachers need in-servicing in understanding the differences between different dialects of English, and teach Standard Australian English as a second dialect.

Sharon: At home you speak English in full, but in the community you break it down.

In each culture, there is a range of ways language can be used. In some countries, there are local dialects which vary from the standard language spoken by the nation. In some communities, we find variations in language use across age groups. For example, some teenage groups have truncated forms of language and particular terms which are not used across the broader population. In each of these contexts, the language used is appropriate, functional, and accepted by the community.

Najwa's story is important for recognising that, first, her Indigenous language is valued by her family and is used in particular contexts, such as social greetings. Second, different forms of language use which differ from Standard Australian English are appropriate for communication within her community and other communities. Even with the UK, we see many different forms of English being spoken. And New Zealander, English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh people and Americans all use dialects of English.

This story highlights how value judgements are made in Australia on people's compliance with Standard Australian English. We see variations across many English-speaking countries in how they use English, yet we do not make the same value judgements. There is also the influence of the print media, TV, video, radio, cinema, and more recently the internet. These draw upon and transmit a range of English dialects.

Recognising that some children may have multiple ways of using English is important in appreciating how children can apply different language forms to different contexts. This is a high-level skill that should be valued.

At home: Families are very relaxed at home

Sharing a fruit box



An only child in a house full of children and adults

Shannon is at the table with all his cousins around. He has a fruit box in his hand. The other cousins are asking if they can have some juice. He willingly shares.



Family is important



The complexity of the family tree



In extended Aboriginal families, more adults means more support, resulting in a relaxed home environment

Najwa explains and others contribute

Najwa: Here we are at breakfast—this is important because Shannon is sharing. He was sharing the fruit box with his family. I think it is important to share. Shannon is an only child. There are four other children in the house who are family. Altogether, there are my parents, four girls with us, as my sister passed away, so the children are with us. Sharing is important when you are an only child.

Denise: Family is really important.

Najwa: I was always brought up with a few fellas in the house. We always have family around—to learn different things.

Sharon: When I was young, there was always a lot of family around and it was good.

Najwa: Family is different, but the same!

Denise: So when we talk about my family, I think it is really complex, but when I talk to others I see that it is not.

Najwa: Aboriginal families are very relaxed at home—if you haven't got time, then there is always someone around to do things for children. It is an easier place to learn.

Laura: Being comfortable at home, because home is a relaxing place; that is where your family is, you belong; kids feel comfortable there; they may not feel comfortable in different places—school may not be the same. School may be just too different from Indigenous cultures.

Janette: Our children learn a lot at home and in the bush. Our children are relaxed at home. They have a whole family to help children learn and to support and encourage them.

Sharing a fruit box

Najwa explains and others contribute



Freedom of children to do things

Najwa: Freedom of children to do things, because everybody takes responsibility, because everybody looks after them; sense of freedom and capacity to explore gives them time and space to grow.

Denise: In schools—children are not moving much—they are sitting still like a statue. Indigenous kids find it hard to sit still, not breathing. It is not natural.

Whilst all children hate sitting still, some cultural groups place less emphasis on this, and therefore children may well have limited experience of sitting still prior to starting school.

In this story of Shannon and Najwa, we see that their home is very relaxed. Children are free to move about, actively encouraged to share, to use their Indigenous language, and are surrounded by family. Shannon is free to explore, to tackle things again and again, and to make decisions about how he spends his time. Space and time are very relaxed, in much the same way as was evident with Janette and Tahlia as they searched for honeyants. Children and adults spend long periods engaged in activities such as never-ending barbeques, as family members come and go or as children move about the bush exploring. There is no real beginning and end, but rather a timeless movement of activity. As teachers, we note that schools are not organised in ways which support a relaxed and timeless atmosphere. Rather, schools work directly to the clock. It is important to recognise that some children may experience cultural shock when they enter a world that is ruled by the clock. In these instances, we need to think creatively about how time and space can be reconceptualised in ways which take account of children's experiences, and provide latitude for moving about in a more relaxed manner. Some important teacher questions for re-thinking these ideas are suggested here.

Can activities or lessons:

- be 'rolled-on' over time, rather than having a set start and finish time?
- be repeated over days, so children can engage in them more than once?
- be set up to allow individuals to take their time, rather than being set up within someone else's time frame?
- allow children to opt to participate or to do something else—giving children the responsibility to decide?
- provide more opportunities to work one-to-one with individuals, as other children work on their own or in small groups, e.g. friendship/family groups?

These questions are useful for appraising teaching and learning activities for the benefit of all children. However, they particularly advantage Indigenous children who already have well-developed skills in taking responsibility for themselves and their siblings, and who have grown up in relaxed and less constricted environments.

At home: Education is only a tool



Some teachers are sometimes more concerned about their own thinking, not the children's

Janette: Non-Indigenous teachers haven't got the same experiences as our kids. They may not understand what knowledge our kids bring. They are usually concerned about their own ideas and are thinking about teaching. Teachers are sometimes more concerned about their own thinking, and not the children's.

Laura: Education for a lot of us it is a tool; it is not anything that we have to have; we only see education as a tool; while many Westerners see it as the be-all and end-all, it is a tool that can be picked up and put down at any time.



Shared understandings

Many Indigenous families are very relaxed at home

At home: we all speak the Lingo

A bit of Lingo is important

Don't be judgemental about our language

At home: Aboriginal families are relaxed

An only child in a house full of children and adults

Family is important

The complexity of the family tree

Aboriginal families are very relaxed at home

Freedom of children to do things

At home: education is only a tool

Teachers are sometimes more concerned about their own thinking, not the children's

Children know what they are doing

When the children go to school they take their family with them



Education is only a tool

Laura: (Western) Education for a lot of us is a tool; it is not anything that we have to have; we only see (Western) education as a tool; whilst many Westerners see it as the be-all and end-all, it is a tool that can be picked up and put down at any time.

Western schooling has not evolved from an Indigenous view of the world. In effect, it is merely a tool for effectively navigating within, around, and through Western society.

There are numerous types of education in our Australian society beside Western schooling. Some are chosen, others are thrust upon people, and some are so much a part of our everyday lives that people are almost oblivious to their influence—Indigenous world views and education.

Recognising that knowledge construction in most Australian schools has taken place within a Western framework is important when working with Indigenous children. When we think in this way, we are able to see that Western education assumes many cultural practices as the norm and transports these into the education system. This also applies to non-Indigenous children from low socioeconomic groups, who often find schooling focuses on middle-class values. Other ways of learning, interacting, and knowledge construction may not be considered.

By questioning all schooling processes, we begin to appreciate that not all practices are necessarily effective for learning. When we ask questions about what we accept as the norm in schooling, we begin to see the diversity of cultures and their social expression. We are free to ask about what other ways learning can look like. Only then can we begin to appreciate the diversity of ways that Indigenous children learn in their homes and communities. We are then in a position to truly teach in cross-cultural ways. We can then appreciate why Western education is a tool for navigating around a Western construction of the world. This book sets out to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and hence practices in schooling. These are discussed further in the next section.

Literacy lenses

Now put on your literacy lenses. What can you see? Write down your ideas:

Members of the Reference Committee share their thinking

Jenni: We need to value children's home and community language forms, 'bridging' to school language forms. We need to make the differences clear, explaining (in kid terms) how language varies according to context, purpose, and audience. Relaxation and fun enhance learning (for all of us); learning through exploration of and interaction with the environment is children's natural way to learning—including literacy learning. Time has a different meaning in community—things take as long as they take—how do you fit learning into 'a literacy hour'?

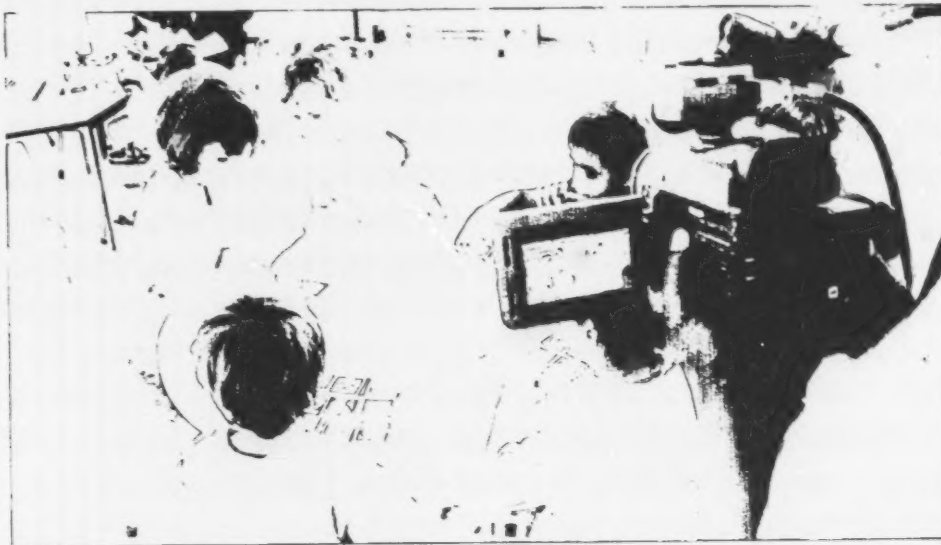
Laurie: When we see literacy as sets of social practices, we understand the importance of focusing on relationships, communication, and building of supportive environments. In a recent study of early literacy practices in 79 prior-to-school services in NSW, many parents emphasised the way that children were able to learn through play in a relaxed environment, and this was seen as particularly important for Aboriginal children. One parent commented that 'all preschools should be nice and relaxed so they (children) want to learn—strict discipline can make kids scared.' (Makin, Hayden, Holland, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz & McNaught, 1999).

Maree: Different language is suitable for different settings. Opportunities to practise things over.



Video link: See Appendix 6

Chapter 9: Indigenous perspectives and world views: 'Through our eyes'



The wisdom gained from the frank and open discussions by the families detailed in this section provides evidence that when children begin school, preschool, or child care they do not come 'empty-handed'. Indigenous children bring with them their own world view and cultural practices and use these to make sense of the new schooling context.

A major aim of the *Building Bridges* project was to provide Indigenous families with an opportunity to act as central agents, selecting those valued cultural skills and knowledge exhibited by their young children. The parent group was initially given a tool to help identify the culturally relevant content of the videos. This tool consisted of three questions:

- What can everyone see?
- What can only the family see?
- What can we no longer see because it is so much a part of our lives?

Pam Cahir, director of the Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA), comments on the benefit of the parents working as a group and acting as the central agents of this project.

I think the fact that the parents did their initial talking together, but with a structure provided by the questions, enabled them to move into a relationship

as co-constructors of knowledge. This was very affirming and strengthening. I think that being together and yet separate from the 'academics' enabled the parents to reflect and talk within a clear framework and therefore they developed a greater competence as they repeated the process with each video. This process was a key element in maintaining real parent control over the content and the way it was understood ... parents had the knowledge that no one else could see, and, if it was important, only they could share it.

After viewing all of the family videos and much discussion, a number of common themes and questions emerged. They focused on the following areas:

1. Families and school educators need to work together to demystify what's happening in homes and in schools, regarding the development of literacy and literacy competence at school.

We need to learn more about the following:

- Schooling and school systems—Western and Indigenous education processes. This means developing understandings about world views and cultures.
 - What is literacy from both Western and Indigenous points of view? What are the values, assumptions, and expectations which underpin and may influence teaching and learning processes in both cultures? (See Figure 9.1 Our values determine what we expect).
 - What types of Indigenous literacy skills and knowledge do families recognise as being important for their children to learn and acquire? How can these skills and this knowledge be used and built on to assist Indigenous children to become competent in Western literacy?
 - Why, when, and how do Indigenous children acquire literacy competence at home and at school?
 - What is currently happening between schools and families, teachers and students? How can families and schools work together to enable more Indigenous children to become competent in Western literacy?
2. Relationships and connections between families and schools were seen as being a crucial part of any child's education, both Indigenous and Western. These connections can lead to shared understandings about:
 - the families of Indigenous children and Western educators
 - cultures and world views

- values, expectations, roles, obligations, and assumptions
 - literacy teaching and learning processes.
3. Western educators and school programs should recognise and acknowledge the diversity within Indigenous families and cultures throughout Australia. Sharon and Kori-Ann's family story highlights this important consideration.
 4. Listening was also seen as being important in order to develop 'real' relationships and educational partnerships. From an international perspective, Salole and Evans (1999, 11-12) stress the need for educators to learn how to listen to families and communities:

We are developing processes that will provide us with the skills to better listen, understand and interpret people's experience and situations. We knew before we started that it would not be enough to just ask questions, even new ones. Nor would it be enough to merely repeat what has been said before ... we need to listen better in order to understand the responses we get; that listening does not mean a condescending, perfunctory half-hearted listening where the listener is drawing conclusions while the information is presented; that listening means finding ways to receive people's responses fully before trying to analyse, interpret or categorise their meaning; that listening means staying open to hearing and understanding.

Within an Australian context, Miriam Rose Ungenmer's perceptions in Chapter 2 reinforce the need for school systems and educators to listen to what Indigenous families are saying. The importance of listening is also highlighted in Djwandayngu and Miranda's family story when we are told that *everyone can learn and everyone can teach*. Listening is a natural part of learning; in fact, it is a tool we need to use in order to learn.

Listening was also seen as an important element in establishing connections and partnerships between the families and their schools. Within these partnerships families can develop understandings about how and when they can support their child's education at school and at home. Kori-Ann's mother, Sharon, talked about how she saw her role at school and how her school understood that many Indigenous family members may assist with raising the children:

I don't go to teacher-parent nights; I just go any time, when I am dropping her off. If I can't go Mum goes ... some teachers will say where's the mother? That is one great thing about my school; they understand.

Figure 9.1: Our values determine what we expect. These are broad generalisations given to provide possible examples of values systems. Educators should understand that there is diversity within Aboriginal cultures



Learning is not restricted to time limits, learning is a gradual process of practising and refining skills until they are perfected



Children are not expected to sit still and look in order to listen and learn

Group or family is main focus

Aboriginal spirituality, religion, world view directly drawn from and connected to Australia.

This explains why Indigenous people have a strong affinity with the land of this country



**These things
are important
to us**

Sharing is valued

There are many other values that could be written down as well as these, but these were the values expressed by families at the workshop



Aboriginal culture values the past because traditions, law, knowledge, kinship, connects people with their ancestors and tells them who they are today. Many families live from day to day because of the need to focus on immediate needs, i.e. housing, food and clothing. Aboriginal world view means that Aboriginal people see themselves as a part of the nature and not separate from it

In many Aboriginal communities the grandparents are seen as the teachers of their grandchildren, whereas the parents' role is to act as the disciplinarian of their children. In other instances, another relative may be responsible for disciplining the children

In most Aboriginal families there are many adults, older siblings and cousins who at different times may be responsible for the younger children

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Centre/school-family interface: looking for reflections

The families involved in the workshop would say that families and schools have the responsibility to care for, stimulate, educate, and raise all children. Therefore, all parties responsible for education need to work together to create nurturing and educationally fertile places where children can gain access to learning.

In reality, however, the experience of many Indigenous families at school has been either uneasy, embarrassing, or confronting. They often don't feel welcome or part of the school and they don't see themselves or their local community reflected in these public places.

These families usually identify with Indigenous staff at the school, if there are any. However, they may still feel as if they are entering an unknown and daunting place.

The families are physically there, but they cannot see their reflections within this environment. They are there in body but not in spirit. This spirit is what they essentially are; it's what connects them to each other, to the natural world, and to the outside world. This spirit is evident in each family's story.

No matter where they come from—suburbs or bush communities—Indigenous children bring their family perspectives, values, and expectations with them. To deny or dismiss the importance of this knowledge would be to devalue, damage, and possibly break a child's spirit.

The school/centre needs to be a place where children and their families feel welcome, safe, and at ease. However, there are a number of factors relating to the school, its staff, and educational programs that have to be considered and understood by the children and their families.

The physical environment

Can the children and their families relate to the physical environment which includes the school grounds, play areas, buildings, and other facilities, along with the classroom resources and equipment used in the day-to-day operation of the school/centre? Do the families see themselves and their culture reflected here? Is it a friendly and interesting place where everyone is made to feel welcome and comfortable? Shannon's mother, Najwa, and Laura reflect on their home environments and explain why their children are always learning at home:

Aboriginal families are very relaxed at home and it is easy to learn in a relaxed environment. They are always learning. If you haven't got time, then there is always someone around to do things for children ... home is a relaxing place; that is where your family is; you belong; kids feel comfortable there; they may not feel comfortable in different places—school may not be the same.

Najwa and Jannette go on to talk about the freedom children have to explore, learn and grow at home and in the bush:

We let kids go out by themselves, exploring; it's giving them a chance to do it; they then come back and show us that they have found these (gestures with hands); they explore and learn things, too, instead of just putting it into their heads; they enjoy sharing with their friends; they talk about their knowledge.

Can schools/centres offer children similar opportunities and learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom/centre? Will children be provided with opportunities to learn through their bodies as well as through their minds? Or will they be expected to sit behind a desk, isolated from each other and the outside environment?

Centre/school staff, teachers, and programs

Can the children and their families relate to or talk to school staff members? Laura commented that the teacher may be a total stranger, especially to a young child:

An important thing in Aboriginal families, in any family, is trust. If you send your child to some other place that isn't your usual place, or part of where your family usually goes—who is going to be taking care of them? Are they going to be responsible for them? Are they going to care for them in the same way as your family would?

If schools/centres have local Indigenous educational support workers, they are the people who will establish connections and open up channels of communication between Indigenous families and school staff. The role of these workers is often underestimated and not fully utilised by either families or school staff. Denise provides an example of how important and effective the support worker is at her son's school.

Everyone knows Carmy and she knows everyone; that includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, the school staff, and many families. She has worked at this school for a number of years and is an integral part of the school. Her presence signals to Indigenous families that this school is OK.

Indigenous families soon learn that there is someone:

- *who they can trust and respect;*
- *who knows and understands them, their culture and their backgrounds;*
- *who will listen to them and who speaks in a language they can understand;*

- *who is approachable;*
- *who is interested in all of the children and their families;*
- *who will be watching over and caring for their children at school;*
- *who is always there;*
- *who is reliable, welcoming, has a sense of humour, and is kind and considerate;*
- *who is diplomatic and sensitive with families and staff members; and*
- *who understands local community values and culturally appropriate ways of behaving and interacting with families.*

And, finally, this person is someone who is willing to act as an advocate for their children.

Carmy is one of the main reasons Indigenous children make up almost one-third of this mainstream school's total population. She draws our attention to the concept of a mother's eye and a teacher's eye when she describes herself:

I'm like a mother or auntie to all of the kids; not just the Aboriginal children.

Schools with Indigenous students need more support workers like Carmy.

Recognition of diversity

Will teachers understand that there is diversity among Indigenous people? Will Indigenous children be provided with learning experiences and resources which acknowledge this diversity?

Sharon and Vicky discussed this issue in Sharon's family story:

Stereotyping is a problem. We all don't have didgeridoos, and we all don't speak the same language—but people think that, and we are all not the same colour; we are all different colours ... It's not what you look like, it's how you feel and act. Teachers need to acknowledge children for who they are and not put stereotypes on them.

Many schools/centres have made and are making concerted efforts to include Indigenous families and their culture into schools and school programs. Educators need to ensure that this cultural information has been drawn from and validated by local Indigenous families as representatives of themselves and their communities.

Acceptance of a child's home language

Will the children be listened to and supported in their learning? Will their languages (including Aboriginal English) be accepted and responded to by teachers? Families felt strongly about this issue, as Sharon says:

Language comes from the home—don't be judgemental about our language. Aboriginal English—this is something that the kids bring with them from home, and teachers should accept the language that they bring with them.

The predominance and importance of Aboriginal English to Indigenous families is highlighted by Diana Eades (1993, p.30–31) when she explains that:

Aboriginal English is spoken throughout Australia as either the first or second language of a great majority of Aboriginal people. It is thought to be the first language of most Aboriginal people in the areas where traditional languages and Creole are not spoken. Aboriginal English plays an important role in the maintenance and assertion of Aboriginal identity, as the linguistic situation before the British invasion shows, Aboriginal people have long used language and speech as markers of group identity ... Aboriginal ways of communicating remain strong, and Aboriginal English signals Aboriginality in many subtle ways. The accent, vocabulary and grammatical patterns of Aboriginal English enable Aboriginal people from all over the country to recognise other Aboriginal people, even in context where visible markers of identity are not present ... Aboriginal ways of using English give Aboriginal people a feeling of being comfortable with each other, and a rich non-verbal communication system in widely used as well.

As well as having Aboriginal English accepted in classrooms, families also expect that teachers will model Standard Australian English for their children. Diana Eades (1993, p.30–31) stresses that teachers of Indigenous children will need to understand how Aboriginal English differs from Standard Australian English:

If we are going to understand the language skills which Aboriginal children bring to school, as well as their English language needs, then we need to understand how Aboriginal English differs from Standard English. Differences are found in all aspects of language: i.e. phonology (or accent and pronunciation), morpho-syntax (grammar), lexico-semantics (or words and their meaning), and pragmatic (or the way the language is used in sociocultural contexts).

A mother's eye and a teacher's eye

Will teachers show the children and their families that they are 'real' people, too, with families of their own? Will they be interested in the children? Will they be consistent? In Sharon and Kori-Ann's story Karen suggests that teachers need to be able to relate to the children as a person as well as a teacher. She says '... We need better teachers. We need teachers with one teacher eye and one mother (father) eye ... ' instead of two teacher's eyes.

Indigenous children are not just individuals

Will teachers understand that many Indigenous children and their families see themselves not as individuals but as members of a family group? Jannette comments:

We (schools) expect a child to work by themselves, (but) they are not just individual kids; we disadvantage them.

Gloria enlarges on this point when she says:

If you put a child on their own, you focus on them; give them the attention; then they succeed or fail, if they fail ... you highlight that failure.

Explicit teaching and shared understandings

Will teachers always explain what the children are expected to do in their work? Will there be clear and consistent guidelines for children to follow and use every day? Denise talks about this issue in Vicky and Gregory's story:

Kids need to be able to ask the right questions to get the right answers ... teachers need a shared understanding with the children because sometimes they assume that kids know what they are expected to do ... an important part of the learning/teaching process is making explicit what the children are expected to learn, and then providing opportunities to practise.

Jannette makes an interesting comment that:

... teachers are sometimes more concerned about their own thinking, and not the children's.

Children are not punished when they make mistakes

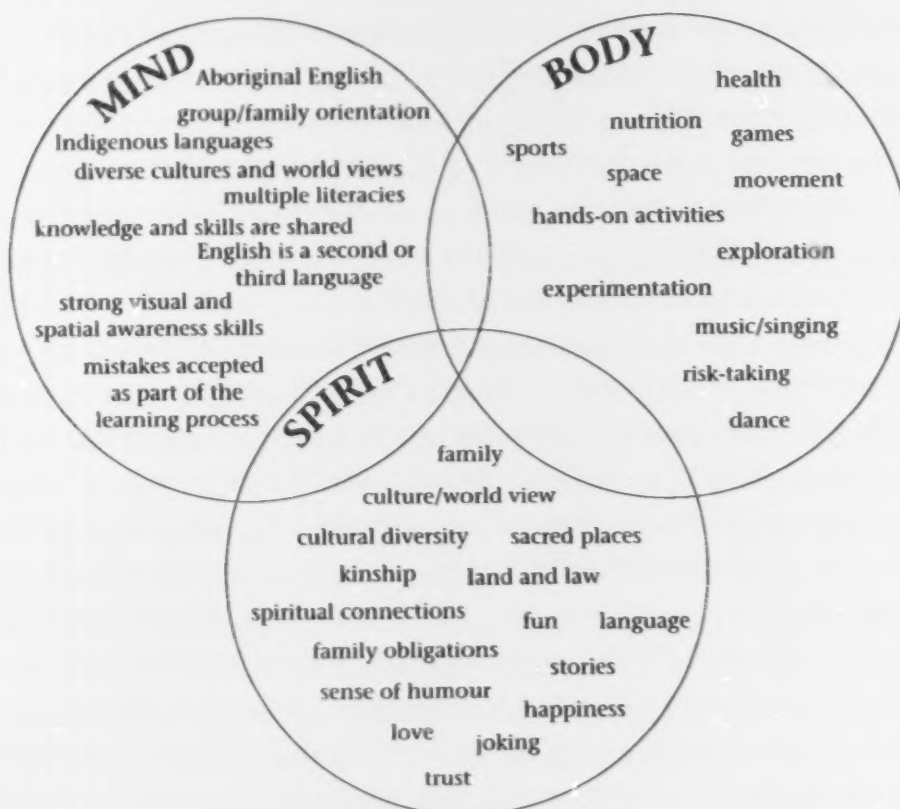
Finally, families were concerned about how teachers manage and care for the children in their classes. Jannette reflects on Djuwandayngu and Miranda's family learning the crow dance:

The children were not punished for making mistakes; they can make mistakes and it is seen to be part of the practices; in mainstream schools we tend to put children down for making mistakes; you can't do that; they [the families] sort of had a laugh at it and then they were off doing it again; instead of talking about it they showed them how. In schools they [our children] are often shamed for having the wrong answers.

During the family discussions a number of educational strategies were suggested to overcome many of the parents' concerns. A holistic educational framework was thought to be a culturally inclusive philosophy and method which could recognise and cater for the 'whole child', incorporating and stimulating his/her mind, body, and spirit. Such a framework would accommodate, rather than assimilate, the cultural and individual needs of all children.

A broad holistic framework was drawn up by the families (See Figure 9.2).

Figure 9.2: An holistic framework for learning



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The main focus of this framework evolved from the interconnections between a child's mind, body, and spirit and the ways they draw on these intrinsic elements to interpret, understand, express, and learn about themselves, their families, their culture, their physical environment (homelands), and the wider world around them.

The interconnections between a child's mind, body, and spirit should not be interpreted as a vague 'New Age' concept. This way of seeing, understanding, and relating to the world has evolved over thousands of years and still exists as a natural part of everyday life for most Indigenous families. When Miriam Rose Ungenmer speaks about 'Dadirri' (listening to us) in Chapter 2 she highlights this connection between a person's mind, body, and spirit.

Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons. We don't mind the waiting because we want things to be done with care.

During the workshop the families talked about their spiritual connection to their families, their land, and their customs. This spirituality was seen as being at the centre of Indigenous culture. The spiritual connections are evident in each of the family's stories if you know how to identify them.

In Jannette and Tahlia's story the grandmother sat in the heat and dug until she found some honeyants. It did not matter how long she took or how many honeyants she found. There was an acceptance that everyone would have to wait until the task was accomplished. This example is a snapshot of a different cultural understanding of time as well as different social expectations and obligations. Tahlia demonstrated her knowledge of this family lore when she pointed out that family members are not supposed to look in the hole while grandmother is still digging. This behaviour would mean that you are being impatient or disrespectful and that you are trying to hurry things up, which in effect shows that you are going against the natural order of culture and life.

The 'never-ending' barbeque at Najwa and Shannon's family home (part of the story where families are very relaxed places), where family members drop in and children come and go, demonstrates this acceptance that events have a 'natural lifetime'. The event begins when everyone is ready and ends when everyone is finished or they have had enough. There are no specific time limits on the natural ebb and flow of interactions and events. The spiritual aspect of this family occasion highlights the importance of maintaining, nurturing and celebrating family connections. Many times throughout the workshop family members stressed the importance of caring for their families as an integral part of Aboriginal culture.

Vicky and Gregory's family also reveals the strong connection between family members. In particular, our attention is directed to the role played by Gregory's uncles when they invite him to help to fix their car. We can see that there is an unspoken obligation that all family members can help to raise a child. Sharon states in her story that 'the family looks after the child, not just one person, but all the people in the family.' Najwa reinforces this point when she says '... Everyone is responsible for children, including males; not just the grandmothers and the aunties, but the males as well; except of course for traditional ways, such as men's and women's business'.

Djuwandayngu and Miranda's family also highlight the family's obligation to help teach and raise the children as they teach their children the crow dance. Djuwandayngu notes that 'most of them are cousins and immediate family; that's how Aboriginal children learn through other families; other families are responsible for them and (their) learning.' This passing on of an important cultural tradition embodies all three elements of the whole child's mind, body, and spirit.

In Gloria, Kyle, Dylan, and Kiesha's family we are shown how a more urban-based family believes in the importance of maintaining (spiritual) links to their extended family, and their traditional land and culture. Gloria emphasises this belief when she states:

Jannette is actually my auntie, she has the language strong and I don't have that. [Western] society has had that sort of impact [on my family]. We need to keep it [culture] going, keep it strong.

A number of important cultural (spiritual) and educational issues arose in Sharon and Kori-Ann's family story. First we learn that Aboriginal families express their identities in different ways across Australia. Sharon points out that:

We [Aboriginal people] don't express our identity in the same way; so because of it, we don't know everything that there is to know about Aboriginal people; we don't fit stereotypes because we are all different.

Second, Sharon draws our attention to the important connection between healthy bodies and learning, when she focuses on her daughter and her classmates eating lunch at preschool. Third, the importance of family connections is revealed once again when Sharon mentions that there are other relatives in her daughter's class. She goes on to talk about whether teachers should be responsible for helping to raise a child as well as teach them because she feels that 'it takes a whole village to raise a child'.

Finally, Laura (who acted as a link person with a couple of the families) raises the subject of trust and asks 'Who is taking care of our children?' Usually only family members are given the sole responsibility of caring for their relatives. The preschool teacher may well be the first person to care for an Indigenous child who is not related.

Naturally, parents want to be sure that their children are well cared for and safe at school. Often families may feel uneasy about handing over care of their child to a virtual stranger—the teacher. Laura refers to this dilemma when she says 'How can you entrust the most valued and important person to you, to a stranger? That is who your teacher often is ...'

Babies and children belong at the 'heart' of Indigenous families. Children are seen as the links between the past and the future; they are the people who will pass on their language and culture to future generations. They have the responsibility of maintaining the family and keeping their language and culture alive; therefore children have to be nurtured by all members of their families.



△ Children belong at the heart of Indigenous families

In order to find and make connections between school knowledge and Indigenous knowledge, thought needs to be given to how the mind, body, and spirit are linked and how this approach may differ from mainstream teaching and learning.

Western education's focus is on developing and expanding a child's knowledge and experience of the world, primarily through their minds. Often educators forget that the mind is inextricably connected to a child's body and spirit and

that children are more able to access learning when their bodies and spirits are healthy and strong. If a child's body and spirit are unhealthy or neglected, this process of learning will not be as effective.

Furthermore, when families and schools/centres focus too much attention on one element or neglect and dismiss other elements, we end up with either sick, unhappy, withdrawn, angry, confused, demoralised or dispirited children. Denise provides a personal example:

When I was nine my teacher hit me with a cane which left several large welts up the back of my legs. I was a very shy and quiet child and I didn't know what I was being punished for. What was even more demoralising was that I had to endure this punishment in front of my whole class. I thought I must have done something wrong so I didn't tell my mother. Luckily one of my cousins told Mum about this incident and she came to the school and spoke to the principal. From that day on my teacher left me alone, but she had already damaged my self-esteem, my confidence, and my spirit. Not long after this experience I became very sick and spent more than one month away from school. Looking back, I can now see how connected a child's mind, body and spirit are and I know that a damaged spirit can lead to a sick and troubled child.

Many Indigenous parents have endured similar and perhaps even worse experiences at school. These negative experiences have influenced parental perceptions of education, and may be one of the factors that have influenced the rate of parental participation in schools.

From a child's point of view, classrooms can be places of power and authority for most teachers. Access to a fair and equitable education will be reliant on how teachers interpret their roles, responsibilities, and obligations to every child in their care.

School educators have dual teaching roles and obligations. They have a duty to their class as a whole to reach and maintain a certain standard of work and they also have a duty to try to identify, plan for, and meet the educational needs of individual students. Most educators readily accept that children need healthy and active minds and bodies in order to learn. However, recognising and nurturing a child's spirit may perhaps be a more difficult concept to understand, cater for, and integrate into educational programs.

At times teachers forget that children are people, too. Every child has its own ways of responding to and dealing with personal issues, fears, and concerns. Children also have their own interests, talents, skills, and knowledge. They are 'whole people' with many different facets. The role of school student is merely one of a child's many roles.

Children have their own (individual and cultural) ways of learning about, relating to, and understanding the world around them. Educators sometimes place too much emphasis on new teaching programs and give insufficient time to relating to, learning about, and understanding the children in their classes/centres. Yet educational programs come and go, while children are the one constant in a class.

Acknowledging a child's physical and emotional (spiritual) needs is directly related to a child's sense of wellbeing and will influence its ability to successfully participate in the centre/school program. Teachers will need to use a 'mother's/father's eye to recognise and deal with individual student needs.

Children have to be able to develop the confidence and the will to participate in school education. They must be explicitly shown their roles as students and the purpose behind their school work. Students need to understand the connections between their everyday schooling and the long-term educational goals of competence in literacy and numeracy skills. They need to understand the value of these skills in their homes and in the wider community, and they need to realise that such skills and knowledge can lead to future employment opportunities in their local communities as well as farther afield.

Effective learning will not develop until educators understand, recognise, and cater for the 'whole child'. If schools/centres undertake a holistic model of education, teachers will be expected to identify and cater for the physical, social/cultural, emotional/spiritual and intellectual needs of every child in their care. They will have to find time to listen to and talk with the children to learn more about their individual needs. Sometimes children are able to express themselves more easily when they are in the playground and out of the classroom.

Education is not an entity unto itself, but is strongly linked to and impacts upon a number of other social institutions, including health, welfare, and employment. From an Indigenous world view, the spirit has to be looked after and kept safe. To neglect it could have a negative effect on a person, their family, and their community in the long term. For many Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) people, the inability to gain effective access to Western education can have far-reaching emotional, social, and economic repercussions which may include one or more of the following problems:

- loss of self-esteem;
- loss of motivation to learn and develop new skills;
- withdrawal from family and friends, and possibly depression;

- low levels of literacy and numeracy which may mean being unable to effectively access social services;
- unemployment, poor health, drug abuse; and
- domestic violence and dysfunctional families.

If our Australian society wants to provide better life opportunities and futures for all children and their families, then a more holistic Western educational philosophy and framework needs to be developed and delivered.

Pedagogy

If a child's educational environment builds on and reflects children's ways of knowing and doing, then the school/centre experience builds upon what they know. Although this is important for all cultural groups, there are some specific pedagogical pathways that need further comment—these are detailed in Section 3.

Our library of knowledge

Putting the discrete elements from each of the family stories together, we begin to have a sense of the 'library' that many Indigenous people carry with them. The metaphor of a library is used here to represent the collections of themes which have been discussed in the previous chapters. In order to fully understand the diversity and continually evolving Indigenous perspective on learning and schooling, we need to read all the books in the library. However, by scanning the shelves we have a sense of the interconnectedness of learning for Indigenous peoples.

Important elements to emerge from the family stories include:

- Family
- Indigenous ways of knowing
- School-family interface
- Pedagogy
- Group orientation
- Multiple literacies
- Diversity

Library

Indigenous ways of knowing

The getting of education
That's my country
Stories tell us who we are
We are the ancestors of our children
Our children know
People see only what is familiar to them
Education is only a tool

School/ family interface

Looking for reflections
Two-way learning is making them one person
When you don't know anyone, you feel lost
Indigenous children spend a lot of time outside
When the children go to school they take their family with them
Aboriginal families are very relaxed at home
She is not just wandering around
Freedom of children to do things
Teachers are sometimes more concerned about their own thinking,
not the children's
Children know what they are doing
Doing and talking
Children are not punished for making mistakes

Pedagogy

The full-up syndrome
Using 'why' questions
Grandma as teacher, parents as disciplinarians
Making learning explicit
Sometimes teachers assume that children know what to do
Who is taking care of them when they are at school?
An only child in a house full of children and adults
The complexity of the family tree
Who in the family is the significant caregiver?

Family

That's someone's mum

They are not just individual kids, they have obligations to each other

Even the young are included

We all grew up looking after each other

Men and boys have a lot to do with babies—males are not frightened of babies

Working on your own means your failures are highlighted

You can't see the library in our head

Group orientation

We expect them to work by themselves

Quiet time to let the other child catch up

Sharing knowledge is not cheating; Sacrificing praise from the teacher for their friend

Homework is a whole family obligation

It takes a whole village to look after a child

Multiple literacies

Reading the body

Schools equate looking with learning

Reading the mind through feelings

Reading the land

Reading stories

Talking Language

Diversity

We don't express our identity in the same way

You can't judge us by what we look like

Times are changing

Section 3

The cultural construction of literacy



Chapter 10: Is it literacy or literacies?



Research reflections

Record what you know about each child in relation to:

- The language(s) spoken at home (or commonly used nouns and verbs).
- Their connectedness with the land.
- Their sense of family obligation.
- Their independence and interdependence.
- Their capacity to read the land, read body language, read printed material, etc.
- Who the significant caregivers are for each child.
- Their extended family.

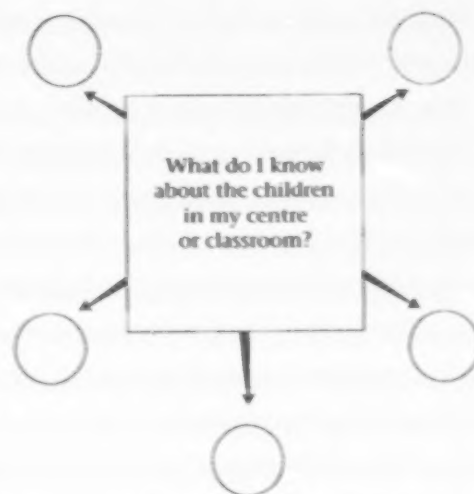


Figure 10.1: Research reflections

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Indigenous children as second school literacy learners

Embedded within the children's background knowledge are their own Indigenous systems of literacy construction (Hill et al., 1998). The acquisition of literacy begins when children are born into their families and their culture (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000; David, Raban, Ure, Gooch, Jago & Barriere, 2000; Rogoff, 1990). As in most cultures, the threads of knowledge start to be drawn together from the first time a baby cries to communicate its needs to its family. From there, the patchwork of all that the child has experienced and learned is constructed (Raban, 2000). In order to understand what an Indigenous literacy might be, we need to consider the accumulated experience we call Indigenous culture and education. For example, collective experiences of Kyle, Kori-Ann, Shannon, Tahlia, Miranda, and Gregory begin to show both unique and common cultural experiences that demonstrate important cultural learning for young Indigenous children growing up in Australia today.



△ Collecting bush coconuts

As with Western religions, Indigenous spiritual beliefs explain how the natural world was made. In Indigenous lore for some groups, the 'creation beings' travelled across the land, shaping it into the many different environments that became known as homelands. A range of Indigenous stories explains the multitude of natural features within the environments of Australia (e.g. see the story by Tahlia and Janette). As a result, nature is very important to many Indigenous people, as it contains many of the symbols needed to make sense of the world. The people must look to the land to understand them. For many, reading the land is only possible within the context of the stories, lores, and ways of relating to each other and to the country.

The stories from the Milingimbi mob, Tahlia with her grandmother in the bush, Gregory with his family in the park collecting pinenuts, Kyle and Dylan collecting bush coconuts—all are examples of reading the land. Travelling out bush is an important educational experience as Tahlia's grandmother tells her about her country through stories in the sand and activities such as collecting honeyants.

Within each of these homelands the landforms, flora and fauna are parts of a complex system of symbols that many Indigenous people:

- see as part of and intimately connected to themselves;
- respect and relate to within their kinship system;
- have used and maintained for generations;
- have always read and understood;
- still recognise in spite of the impact of Western culture and lifestyle; and
- have learned from, and will continue to learn from, so that they can pass this knowledge and culture on to their children.

When Indigenous children begin child care, preschool, or school, many can already listen and speak in their mother tongue, in English, or in both languages, and they can read the land. Within Indigenous literacy, meaning is expressed through the people themselves and their homelands. Even though Indigenous peoples differ in their contemporary use of literacy, for many their skills and knowledge are still linked to this traditional world view.

Two main factors have influenced the evolution of contemporary Indigenous literacy. These are length of exposure to Western culture (i.e. political, social, and economic policies) and isolation (both geographical and social) from land, family, language, and culture. In addition, the quality of the teaching that children have experienced will have influenced their contemporary Indigenous literacy. (See McRae, Ainsworth, Cummings, Hughes, Makay, Price, Rowland, Warhurst, Woods & Zbar, 2000.)

Sometimes Indigenous peoples themselves experience difficulty understanding how connected they still are with their traditional culture. This was evident in the stories from the families detailed in Section 1, where some expressed surprise at how much cultural knowledge they still had despite the belief that they held limited knowledge of their own Language. For example, Najwa found that, although her family spoke only a few words in Language, the cultural significance attached to those words was just as rich as for those of Tahlia's family who could speak Language fluently.

In effect, many Indigenous families and children are *second literacy learners* when they enter schools and centres. It is not surprising, then, that they may experience confusion and difficulty when learning a partially or completely new system of literacy.

Multiple Literacies

Record all the literacies that your children may know and use at home (not just at school). As you read, add more to your concept map. Think about the different symbols the children may see:

- in the home
- in the community
- in nature
- in vehicles
- on clothing, and
- on people's faces and bodies.

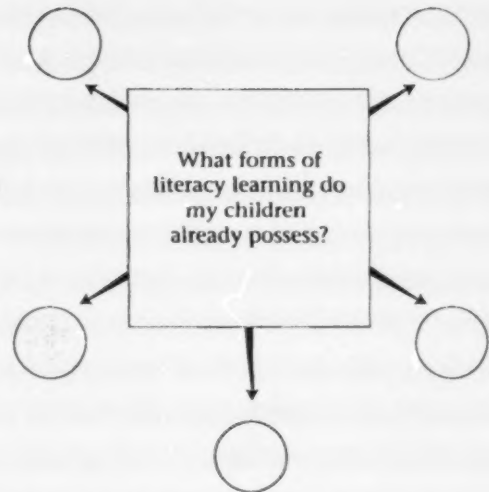


Figure 10.2: Research reflections

Literacy from a traditional Indigenous world view would be the ability to communicate appropriately within kinship systems, as well as being able to read and interpret local symbols of nature in order to develop ways to survive and to maintain family and culture. When considered together, the family stories in Section 1 demonstrate a range of communication methods.

In contemporary Australia, language and culturally recognised symbols (e.g. kinship relationships, terms and symbols, hand signs, gestures, symbols in painting and stories) are the mediums used by many Indigenous people to communicate with others.

These methods are also used to record, express, and pass on information to others within local kinship systems. For example, in Sharon and Kori-Ann's story, the bond between family members becomes more important in the school context, as cousins signal their obligations to support each other. Gloria stresses these connections between Kyle and Dylan in their home interactions, as Kyle learns to tie his shoelaces and as Kyle and Dylan work together to gather bush coconuts.

Indigenous literacy, therefore, involves speaking, listening, reading natural and human-made symbols, recording language in lore, stories, songs, dance, rituals and traditions, and observing body and sign language—combined with intuitive and critical thinking. Religious and spiritual beliefs, values, customs, and traditions are embedded within all of these elements of Indigenous literacy. The learning of these symbols within the context of family and spiritual connections was particularly evident when Grandma and Tahlia visited their 'country'.

Indigenous people use language (both spoken and symbolic) in many different forms. These include speaking, reading, writing (using Indigenous symbols and

languages, as well as English), painting, making music, singing, dancing and story-telling-varying according to context, purpose, and audience. Language is also contained within feelings, actions, thought, pictures, and word pictures.

Thought pictures:

- allow you to think about and visualise ideas from many different perspectives.

Pictures:

- can express many things
- can be interpreted in many different ways by many different people.

Word pictures:

- tell us stories
- describe and explain feelings, beliefs, values, points of view, and understandings.

Symbols:

- can stand alone and express meanings.

Letters and words:

- are also symbols but they have to be seen, read, and interpreted in specific contexts before you can understand their meaning.

Thought pictures, pictures, and word pictures are multidimensional and at times intuitive representations that can be viewed and interpreted from many different perspectives.

Written words are more prescriptive symbols with specific meanings which change only if placed and used in different contexts. One English word may have many different meanings to Indigenous people, depending where they live and the way they translate English into their own mother tongue. For example, the word 'stone' can also mean money in some cultures.

English is a foreign language for many Indigenous people. It is not the first language of this country. Therefore many Indigenous people use English words as tools. They need to use only enough words to convey meaning or to communicate with others.

Prowess with the English language is valued by many Western people, and may lead to the use of more detailed language or subject-specific terminology to clarify

and specify meaning, with different disciplines having their own language. Consider the language used by people working in the areas of education, medicine, science, computers, motor mechanics, etc. Such language reveals:

- the connection to the discipline;
- the expertise of the user; and
- how others are excluded from the knowledge of the discipline.

Indigenous cultures also have their own methods of expressing prowess with their languages.

Djuwandayngu, a parent and teacher from Milingimbi in the Northern Territory, sums up Indigenous literacy when she says:

Literacy is language.

Literacy is how we communicate.

Literacy is in dancing, singing ... culture.

Literacy is how to pass on a message to younger children and to everyone else.

Literacy is how we communicate, not just reading and writing.

Literacy is everything else ...

If we examine the language and literacy definition put forward by the Australian Early Childhood Association we find:

Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and write appropriately in a range of contexts. It also involves the integration of speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking with reading and writing and includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations (AECA, 1999, p.1).

The National Literacy Plan developed by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEST, 2000 <http://www.aeca.org.au/news.html>) defines literacy as:

... Language in use—speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing and drawing. What is involved in each of these language modes varies according to context, purpose, and audience.

Context, purpose, and communication are common threads between the three definitions. Reading the land, spiritual connections, and communicating through dance and music are generally areas that are not included in Western school forms of literacy.

Standard Australian English is the dominant language within Australia, and the language of power. For example, the naming of landmarks such as rivers, creeks, towns, mountains, etc. in English reinforces the domination of one culture over another. Having signposts showing the local Indigenous name for the landmark in place of or alongside the English label sends a very different message to the community. The main language in use in a particular community accentuates the power of the community.

Hill et al. (1998), in discussing power, argue that schools:

... take the habitus of the dominant group as the natural and proper habitus and treat all children as if they had equal access to it.

The implication is that children from dominated groups:

... can only acquire with great effort something which is given to children of the cultivated classes—style, taste, wit—in short, those attitudes and aptitudes which seem natural in members of the cultivated classes and naturally expected of them precisely because (in the ethological sense) they are the culture of that class (Bourdieu, quoted in Harker, 1990, p.87).

In this way, the dominant habitus becomes a form of cultural capital that the schools take for granted. Poor achievement for some groups and positive outcomes for others occur when those with the appropriate cultural capital are reinforced with success, while others are not (p.26).



△ Literacy is in dancing, singing ... culture

Critically examine your program and note what forms of literacy you are assuming and what forms of literacy you are promoting. Note what forms of literacy you are using as teaching tools in your program and compare this with what you have recorded in Figure 10.2.

Think of two Indigenous children in your school/centre. Plot the literacies they have and compare those with what you have recorded in Figure 10.3. Do you notice any bias? Have you acknowledged multiple literacies? If there are differences, how could you change your program to reflect what you now know? Specifically, how could you organise teaching-learning experiences so that you can see and value a range of literacies? Record three ideas:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

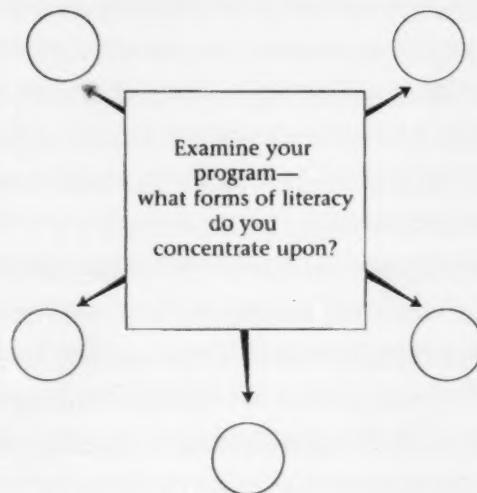


Figure 10.3: Research reflections

It is not literacy, but Western school literacy

Non-Indigenous people need to think about the literacy skills and knowledge that Indigenous children have already developed—you take on a deficit view of children when you worry about what someone does not have. It makes sense that you should build onto the skills and knowledge that your students are familiar with and competent in (see McRae et al., 2000).

Moving out of a deficit model

There has been a long history of talking, researching, and writing about the difficulties Indigenous children have with acquiring and mastering Western literacy skills and knowledge, with the publication of statistics to demonstrate the gap in outcomes of literacy and numeracy.

Now it is time to change the negative focus and build onto the skills and knowledge Indigenous children bring with them to school—to ensure 'effective practice' in teaching-learning programs (see McRae et al., 2000).

Making Western schooling explicit

Schools assume that, just because most Indigenous peoples in this country live within a dominant Western culture, they have been assimilated into that culture. Schools expect and assume that most Indigenous people think about and develop literacy in the same way as Western society does. However, wherever Indigenous people live in Australia, they are usually literate in their own communities (each of the family stories in Section 1 of the book demonstrates this). From the moment their children are born, they begin the process of acquiring and developing literacy skills and knowledge in their own culture. This was evident in the stories of the children with their families as they developed literacy skills of reading the land, reading body language, reading family obligations, etc. When many Indigenous children enter school they have to learn a different and perhaps relatively new system of literacy—Western school literacy.

Non-Indigenous teachers first need to recognise that Western school literacy is a form of literacy not necessarily familiar to all cultural groups in Australia. Second, they need to look for and try to understand the literacy learning that Indigenous children bring with them to school. With these two ways of thinking, cross-cultural teaching is more likely to be in tune with rather than alien to many Indigenous children. For example, Hill et al. (1998), citing Delpit (1988), state:

... Schools must provide children with the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home. She does not advocate that it is the school's job to attempt to change the homes of poor and non-white children to match the homes of those in power (p.29).

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS THAT YOU CAN FIND OUT ABOUT THE LITERACY LEARNING OF THE INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN YOUR CENTRE?

Appendix 7 provides an example of a preschool profile developed by the Indigenous Branch of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The profile encourages you to meet with families and venture into their community to find out more about children's experiences with the different forms of literacy. The profile is based upon a sociocultural view of assessment.

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Chapter 11: Building bridges to Western literacy



Finding the connections

Indigenous systems of education and therefore literacy are expressed in different forms from school education and literacy. In the previous chapter it was shown that many Indigenous children enter schools or centres as second literacy learners, no matter where they live or how they express their culture.

How can non-Indigenous teachers add value to Indigenous literacy in ways which respect and value what children bring? How can non-Indigenous teachers act as cultural brokers between two knowledge systems in ways which sensitively introduce Western school literacy as a tool for navigating around Western society? Most non-Indigenous teachers need guidance on teaching appropriately in cross-cultural contexts (See MacRae et al., 2000). Because of the spiritual implications and the complexities of cultural connections (as demonstrated in Section 1 of this book), a teaching example from Denise's program follows. This simple example is followed by more complex literacy teaching example.

Approximately six years ago I began working as a preschool teacher within an independent Aboriginal school within Alice Springs. I had come from Queensland and, although Aboriginal, I did not consider that I knew the culture of the area. The school within which my preschool resides, offers a two-way approach to learning, which means that the children can learn both

Aboriginal and Western culture. Many of the children in my class speak English as a second or third language, some children travel long distances on buses to get to school every day, while other children live either in town or on the outskirts of town in Aboriginal-owned town camps, run by Aboriginal councils.

After six years, I have come to know most of the families who come to our school. If any new child arrives at school on the bus, we can soon find out who they are and where they live, once we know which family they are related to.

Now that I have set the context in which I teach I will begin to unpack for you my thinking processes in planning for cross-cultural teaching. The first question I always ask myself is: 'What do I know about my children?' In teaching 'colour' to the children—something that is a common part of preschool education—I give thought to the fact that:

- *These children come from a variety of different backgrounds ranging from a traditional to an urban lifestyle.*
- *English is a second or a third language for many of the children.*
- *English is the only language for some children.*
- *The concept of colour is different in Indigenous culture in this area—that is, the use of earth colours is well understood, but words exist for those colours only in this region.*
- *Some children will know lots of Western colours and colour words.*
- *Some children won't know any colour words in English.*
- *Most children can match colour.*

In thinking about teaching colour, I have to find something that all these different children can easily recognise, relate to, and learn from. The Aboriginal flag is the common connection for all the children. I know that these children have seen this flag around town in shops, at Aboriginal organisations, in their communities, in the school, in books, on posters, on t-shirts, on TV, on the side of the school bus, and at football. This context for talking about colours is something that not only relates to their lives but is important to them and has a spiritual connection for them. Using the Aboriginal flag is the opposite to introducing a 'colour week' whereby everyone looks at the colour of the week, placing objects of that colour on to the colour table. This would represent a decontextualised approach to teaching colour for my Aboriginal children.

I do not take an atomistic approach either—that is just studying one colour at a time. But rather I teach three colours at once—red, black, and yellow.

I just can't start anywhere; I have to think about how I am going to teach the three colours. First of all I make sure all the kids are familiar with it; I still don't assume that every child has seen or can recognise the Aboriginal flag. So first of all I put things in the classroom—posters and magazines, stories that have an Aboriginal flag—around the room. I just put them around the room and they see them incidentally; they may not tell me, but they see them. They are very observant, they don't miss a thing. Next I draw their attention to the flag and ask them who has seen this (I don't name it). We share stories about where and when we have seen the flag. When we start to talk in a group about the flag, the children often rush around the room to show me where they can see the Aboriginal flags in the classroom. We compare the pictures of the flags and look to see if the flags are the same. While we are doing this we are matching and talking about colours and shapes in the flag. The children will then start matching the colours in the flag with the same colours they see around them or even on their own clothes. In our classroom there is lots of talking, excitement, movement, participation, sharing information and experiences, and lots of discussion around matching and clarification of colour words and shape words. My children are not always expected to be still and quiet.

After all the children have seen and discussed the characteristics of the flag, i.e. colours and shapes in the flag, I explain to whom the flag belongs and who it represents. We talk about who are Aboriginal people. All the children and both teachers in our class are Aboriginal so I say 'I am Aboriginal and so are you. We all come to this Aboriginal school and preschool'. What I am doing is explicitly teaching the children about their identity as Aboriginal people. I want them to know who they are and to feel proud of themselves and their culture. In our class/school we all don't look the same, we know varying amounts of our traditional cultures and languages, but we are all Aboriginal people.

Over the next few days we revisit the Aboriginal flag. We continually match and talk about its colours and shapes. I talk about the colours in a specific sequence—red, black, and yellow—because I am going to teach the children a song about the flag, which uses the colour words in this sequence.

When we do get to learn this song, the children are already familiar with the words in the chorus: red, black, and yellow, and they know what the song is about because we have developed a shared and common understanding of who and what the Aboriginal flag represents.

The children love to sing so they soon learn the words to this simple song. They take this song about the Aboriginal flag home with them to share all of this new knowledge with their families. They have learned much more than three colours by the end of the time.

The children then began exploring other colours in their environment, drawing upon their previous 'flag' experience as a model for looking at the colours in the local McDonald's sign (yellow and red) and eventually other commonly-known symbols within the community.

Can you see how something so simple and small can lead to children being interested in and excited about learning new concepts?

(Denise)

In this example it is possible to see a number of important cross-cultural teaching principles that are useful for Western teachers. First, the example encourages children to give their full attention to the information because it builds upon their experiences, knowledge, and observation skills. Because the children are familiar with the teaching context, they know what you are talking about and are able to contribute to the discussion. In this process you are developing shared meanings and common understandings about known concepts which act as a springboard to new and unknown concepts—Western colours. An example of this way of teaching can be shown in Figure 11.1 (modified from a model developed by Barbara Jordan to demonstrate co-construction). See Rogoff (1990) for a thoughtful cross-cultural analysis of shared learning and apprenticeship in thinking.

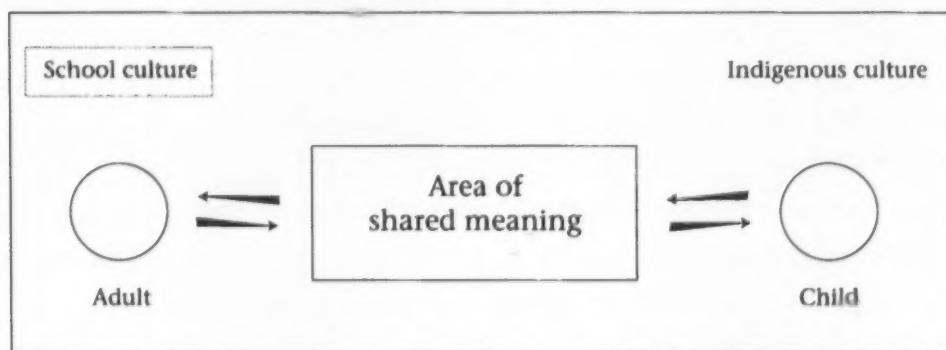


Figure 11.1: The explicit sharing of cultural knowledge—both ways

Denise has developed an area of shared meaning with the children which provides a strong and broad foundation upon which to build Western colour names and concepts. Had Denise simply introduced Western concepts of colour, then the adult-child interactional band would have been narrow, as shown in Figure 11.2.

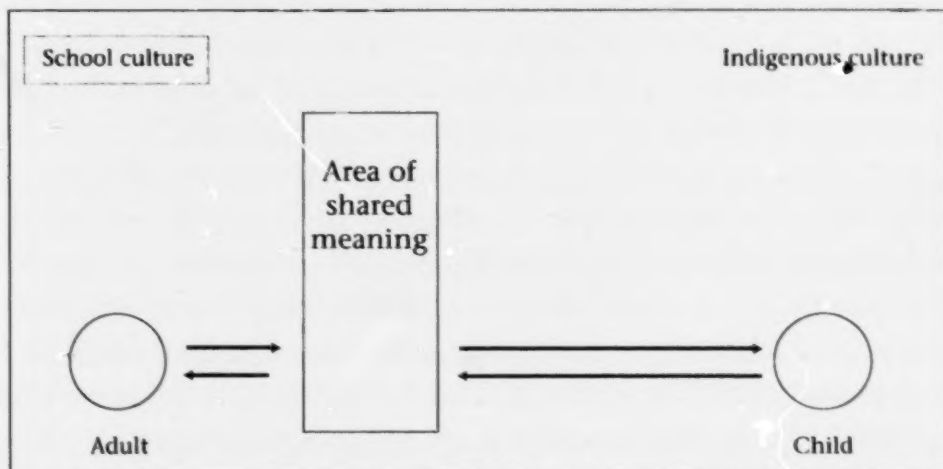


Figure 11.2: Western school knowledge is assumed as the norm

Similarly, if Denise had worked only on the children's existing Indigenous knowledge of colour, without sharing what she wanted to explore—Western colour—then the interactional band would also have been narrow, as shown in Figure 11.3.

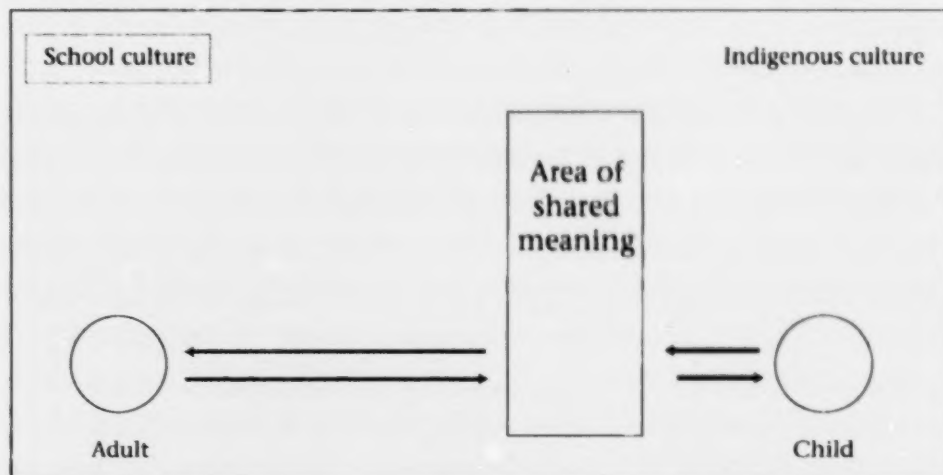


Figure 11.3: Only Indigenous knowledge is considered in the schooling process

Figures 11.1–11.3: Developing shared meaning with children (Jordan, 1999). Slightly modified from Jordan (1999) to illustrate cultural sharing and border crossing between cultures.

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In this teaching example, the children feel valued because they have been given opportunities to share their knowledge and skills. They are able to develop their confidence and self-esteem as valued and active participants in learning and within their peer group.

The children and their families are also learning about and seeing an important symbol of their culture being recognised and incorporated into the school/centre program.

The children enjoy the learning because this is the way many Indigenous children learn at home—they observe, listen, play, talk, and make connections. These connections are often spiritually-based.

This teaching-learning process may require a different way of thinking. However, the connections are there; we just have to find them. For example, in the family stories the process of collecting pinenuts and bush coconuts are examples of the connections between Indigenous people and their culture which are valued and practised in the community and which can be incorporated within teaching programs.

Differences in pedagogical practices relating to colour have also been noted by scholars such as Penn (2000), when she writes:

... Young children in the UK are expected to achieve certain measurable performance outcomes as a result of their attendance at preschool. One of these outcomes is the ability to recognize basic colours: red, blue, yellow and so on. Mongolian herder children of the same age will have learnt to distinguish horses by their colour. Horses come in varying shades of black, white and grey and a Mongolian child would be expected to distinguish about 320 of these combinations by name (p.10).

In Western schooling and preschooling contexts, many teaching programs seek to co-construct learning as shown in Figure 11.1. However, in reality the co-construction is usually focused on a Western context (teaching Western colours) featuring the practice of teaching one colour at a time. The teaching example described by Denise deals with Western colours. However, her program features not only what is of interest to the particular children being taught and their spiritual connections with the Aboriginal flag, but lessons which are framed within a more appropriate teaching approach—teaching three colours at one time.

RESEARCH REFLECTIONS

Examine the other areas in your program (e.g. time, independence, etc.) and think about how you teach them. What do you know about your children's experiences in each of these areas? Think beyond a Western context or a stereotypical Indigenous context. Are you teaching in ways that connect with the children's everyday life and cultural experiences?

Western literacy connections

It has been argued by Gray and Cowey (2000) that there are contexts that need to be introduced to children so that they can become successful literacy learners. If Western literacy is considered as unfamiliar to some Indigenous children, then how are we to teach Western school literacy cross-culturally?

If we consider a recently born infant, we will be sure that there will be many environmental contexts that this infant has as yet not experienced. If we examine the interactional patterns in the infant's life, we note that the environment is socially mediated for the child (Rogoff, 1999; Wertsch et al., 1996). Through sensitive attention, reciprocity, and social referencing, the infant is introduced to many cultural artefacts and practices. These build to produce the child's patchwork of cultural knowledge and skills. Many Indigenous cultures build a capacity for reading the land, art, dance, and storytelling, interspersed with varying degrees of book and environmental print reading. (See the stories from Tahlia and Grandma, the Milingimbi mob, and Gregory and Vicky.)

Most of the research literature that supports literacy development is based upon interactions between adults and children and centred on books (see Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2000; Gray & Cowey, 2000; David et al., 2000). Less is understood about Indigenous literacy or the interplay between it and Western school literacy. The previous section provided a starting point to thinking about the multiple literacies many Indigenous children experience.

There is a need for co-construction—so that teachers and children understand each other and know about multiple literacies (see McRae, 2000). For co-construction to happen, children and their families need to be given opportunities to share their culture, and teachers in schools and centres need to articulate the outcomes they wish to work towards.

In co-constructing learning, as shown in Figure 11.1, it is important to not only think about the literacies that Indigenous children may bring with them to school, but to give thought to building links to Western literacy. For instance, Hill et al., citing Delpit (1988), states:

... Good intentions about diversity are not enough. Being nice, warm and friendly can lead to a lack of challenging standards and a lowering of expectations. Teachers have the responsibility to teach the codes needed to participate fully in mainstream life. Delpit (1988) states that all students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in mainstream life, not by being forced to do mundane pointless exercises but in meaningful endeavours. They need access to teachers' expert knowledge of the conventions of the written code which are just that, conventions which have developed originally in an arbitrary way to record meaning. While acknowledging the expert knowledge of the teacher, the expert knowledge of the learner must be acknowledged as well (pp.29-30).

The predominance of Western research into Western school literacy has demonstrated the importance of the role of the adult in mediating literacy learning through joint attention during book reading (see Hill et al., 1998). The scaffolding in these book-oriented contexts has been shown to be important for the development of Western literacy (Gray & Cowey, 2000). As a result, teachers frequently read to children. The gradual build-up of children's book orientation skills can be shown in Figure 11.4 below.

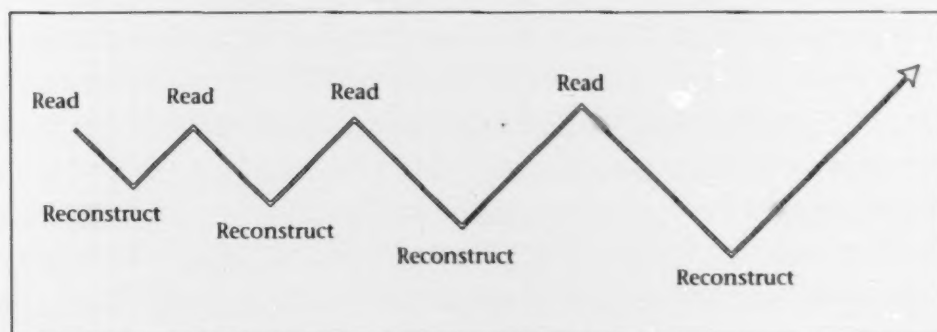


Figure 11.4: Scaffolding literacy in early childhood settings (Gray & Cowey, 2000).

Research which has specifically examined literacy for Indigenous children in Australia is that of Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey. Their work on scaffolding literacy has demonstrated a high level of reading success for school-age Indigenous children. According to Gray and Cowey (2000, p.7) the main principles for scaffolding in educational settings include:

- building intersubjectivity;
- engagement in joint construction;
- progressively handing over responsibility of learning to the child;
- developing scaffolding as part of a language routine.

Scaffolding literacy as detailed by Gray and Cowey is unlike the co-construction process detailed in Figure 11.1, as it begins with the explicit development of Western literacy, based on print found in children's story books. Building upon children's existing reading process skills of reading the land, gestures, body, etc., as discussed earlier, scaffolding literacy takes these skills and moves them to a book-based context.

Building intersubjectivity

'The building of a high level of intersubjectively shared common knowledge between teachers and children is fundamental to the success or otherwise of scaffolding in educational settings' (Gray & Cowey, 2000, p.7). An example of this was the children's and the adults' participation in the crow dance. The children as observers of the crow dance are clearly involved in, but not necessarily active participants of, the dance. The community owns the context.

Engagement in joint construction with children

This process is a dynamic one that allows adults and children to assume varying degrees of control within the learning interaction. Active participation is required from both children and adults.

(Gray & Cowey, 2000, p.7)

In the example of the crow dance, the children are invited to participate in performing the dance. The children and the adults jointly undertake the steps required. The children do the steps they know and join in when they can, but always in the context of the whole performance. The child, as a member of the community, begins to participate in the cultural experience.

Progressively handing over responsibility of learning to the child

Teachers must actively seek to 'hand over' responsibility of the learning. To do so they must continually 'up the ante' in a manner that progressively extends the learning task facing the child.

(Gray & Cowey, 2000, p.7).

For example, in the crow dance, once the children gain more competence, they undertake more of the performance, until eventually they are able to perform the

crow dance on their own. The children are competent members of the community which owns the context.

Developing scaffolding as part of a language routine

Teachers must develop scaffolding as a process which takes place over time. They must program for lesson sequences which provide for children to bring forward learning intersubjectively shared in earlier lessons into later learning attempts.

(Gray & Cowey, 2000, p.7)

Learning cultural practices is built into the activities of the community. The routine for learning the crow dance and other dances is embedded in the activity of participating in community activities.

According to Rogoff (1990), co-construction is not necessary, as children are being apprenticed into the real community of their culture. But, in a school or centre learning environment all children bring with them their cultural knowledge, which is generally different from Western middle-class schooling (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In order to know about children's culture, particularly Indigenous cultures, teachers need to co-construct learning. However, where book-based experiences which lead to Western literacy learning are not a predominant part of the child's culture, teachers will need to actively scaffold literacy learning. Building bridges to Western literacy is an important element of a literacy program in early childhood education.

The four elements of the scaffolding process detailed above (Gray & Cowey, 2000), demonstrate one way that children can be introduced to literacy learning. Through developing shared understandings, teachers will allow children to own more and more of the learning over time. An example of this process in a preschool context can be shown below as Denise reads *Greedy Cat* to her children.

Building intersubjectivity

Denise: This is the book that Tahlia chose for us to read today. Let's look at the cover and see if we can work out what the story might be about. The pictures on the cover will give us some clues. What can you see?

Children: Cat!

Denise: Yes, there is a cat on the cover.

Children: A mum!

Denise: There is also a mum on the cover. You have read the pictures well. We now know that the book is about a mum and a cat. Let's look at the words. I wonder what else we can learn about the book?

Tahlia: Goat!

Denise: Goat begins with 'G' (pointing to the alphabet posters) and the first word does begin with 'G' (points to first letter in title). Good reading, Tahlia! It says here (pointing to the words) 'Greedy Cat'. It is just not an ordinary cat in this story, but a *greedy* cat! Does anyone know what a greedy cat might be? (Continues discussion.)

Denise makes it clear what information can be gained by reading the cover of the book. She models how to read the pictures and the words—two sources of information. She also draws from the children what they already know and what they understand about the word 'greedy'. She is building common knowledge about the book and about how to 'read' the cover for information about the story. It should be noted that power and context at this stage is owned by the teacher. She has control and is making Western literacy explicit to the children. They do not have to guess what is in the teacher's head—she is sharing what she wants them to focus on.



△ Denise models how to read the pictures and words

Engagement in joint construction

In the next sequence, the children are already familiar with the text. Denise is focusing the children's attention on reading the picture cues to help them with predicting what might be written in the text. She jointly constructs this process with them through careful questioning. The children and Denise construct the storyline from the picture cues, before Denise reads the text.

Denise: What's happening while Mum is pumping up the tyre?

Children: Greedy Cat!

Denise: What is he looking at?

Children: Chocolate!

Denise: The chocolate in the shopping bag.

Children: Chocolate in shopping bag.

Denise: Can Mum see what he is doing?

All: No.

Denise then reads the text on that page.

Progressively handing over responsibility

Over successive readings Denise hands over more and more responsibility for text construction to the children. For example, in each interaction Denise accepts the ideas and words the children give her, and she expands on them each time. Denise starts the page with a question that the children not only know the answer to, as they have already studied the book, but one they can see clues for on the page—pumping up the flat tyre:

Denise: What does she have to do?

Tahlia: She has to pump it up.

Denise: That's right; she has to pump up the tyre.

Denise extends the children's responses into more complex sentences that convey more meaning and more of the book language that the children will read.

She also cues them into the other visual messages in the book:

Denise: What's happening while Mum is pumping up the tyre?

Children: Greedy Cat!



△ Tahlia reads part of the text

Developing scaffolding as part of a language routine

In the next sequence, Denise invites Tahlia to read parts of the text, following a routine that is familiar to the children:

Denise: Tahlia, would you like to come around and have a read of this? Let's see if Tahlia can help us with this part of the story. Ready? Who went shopping?

Tahlia: *(Denise helping Tahlia point to each word as they read)* Mum went shopping and got some chocolate. Gobble, gobble, *(only Tahlia reading from here)* gobble and that was the end of that!

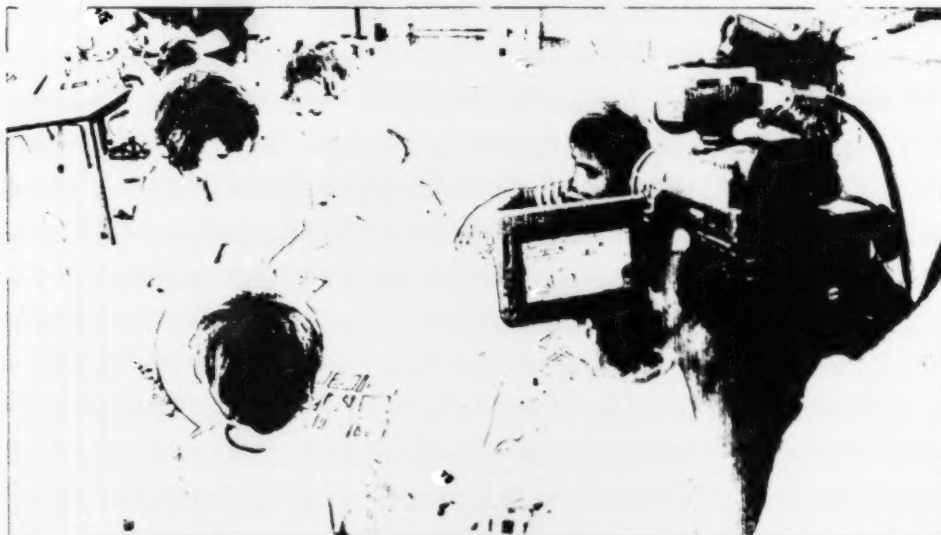
Tahlia was able to join in reading many of the words, while Denise supported her through prompting 'Who went shopping' or by reading alongside her in the more difficult sections, but allowing her to read the chorus independently. This part of the process demonstrates the scaffolding routine, in which children take responsibility for those parts of the task they know, and the teacher progressively hands more and more responsibility over to the children until they can read the text independently. Denise has developed a very helpful routine as she reads books to children—a routine which will allow them to take ownership over the text over successive reads.

In these examples, Denise carefully unfolds the sequences to the story through questioning. The children can easily respond and easily experience success. Denise increases their sentence complexity and structure as they respond orally, preparing them for the book language they then go on to read.

Literacy connections are made for the children. These connections are not forced but occur because the children and Denise have developed a common knowledge about the books they are reading, the letters they are discussing, the new and interesting words they are studying in the context of the stories (Rogoff, 1990). Denise has built an area of joint literacy learning with the story of *Greedy Cat*. Through shared knowledge, it is possible for Denise to easily engage the children in the joint construction of the text. The rules for reading printed material were made clear. The predictability of the routines allowed children to progressively take more responsibility for reading the text.

Although other forms of literacy learning have been developed, scaffolding literacy has been shown to work successfully in a range of Indigenous community schools (Gray & Cowey, 2000).

Chapter 12: The toolkit



This chapter presents some of the tools that may be helpful to both Indigenous families and non-Indigenous teachers as they work together to support children's literacy learning. The information outlined here is the net result of the research project which underpins this book. Not all the information here will suit your context. You need to be selective in your choice.

The tools you select for your toolkit will depend upon your group of children. One toolkit will not work for all groups, as each child and community will express their cultural identity differently. Select those tools you need, and keep in mind that you will need to re-kit yourself for each new group of children.

However, bear in mind that the selection process is not a one-way communicative context. The research grew out of the following:

- Developing a relationship with families and their link person (e.g. liaison officer).
- Families video-taping their preschool-aged child at home and in the community.
- Workshopping as a group the families with the video material of their child.

- Providing families with sets of questions to determine the things everyone will see in the video, things only the family will notice, the things that are taken for granted but which are important for learning.
- Families supporting each other to discover what was unique about their child's home experiences, what was common to the group, and where the mismatch lay with Western schooling.

In tooling-up for the process, give thought to how you can bring families together in ways which will build trust and give them confidence to talk about themselves and their child. This may mean you sharing with families first, telling them who you are and where you are from, talking about your extended family, where you were born, and the place you feel connected to. Also give thought to your discussion starters—in the project, the families showed their video of their child and talked about what was important to them about their child growing up in Australia today. The workshopping experience meant that no family member ever felt isolated or put into a position where they spoke on their own to a larger group or audience. The workshop questions provided a suitable and non-threatening process for all the families. These were then shared with the broader group, using the video material as their visual aid.

Although you will be developing your own method for working with families, the following ideas will provide a starting point for building a partnership.

Teacher's toolkit

What I need in my toolkit

Show children and families that you are a real person with a family of your own.

Show you are interested in the children and their backgrounds.

Learn about the ways children learn.

Listen to, observe, and talk with the children—they will show you who they are and what they are interested in. They will show you the places where learning can start and evolve.

Find out who looks after each child and their relationship to the child.

Acknowledge the importance of a child's family by inviting family into the school/centre to join in with your program; teaching and sharing skills, knowledge, and talents; encouraging families to get involved in decision-making within the school/centre; i.e. school council, parent committees.

Accept the language the children bring to the school/centre, while modelling Standard Australian English as a second dialect for the children to listen to and learn.

Try not to make assumptions about the children and their families—go and talk to the families.

Teacher's toolkit

What I need in my toolkit

Recognise and acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous culture across Australia—don't assume there is just one cultural group called Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander.

Develop understandings about how Aboriginal people throughout Australia express their identity according to regional, historical, and political influences.

Understand that just because a child and family are Aboriginal that does not mean they will be experts on Aboriginal culture across Australia.

Learn about local cultural ways of behaving.

Understand that relationships and trust may take a long time to build between the school/centre and families. Are you willing or able to make a long-term commitment to these children and their families?

Understand that centres/schools are Western places of power for teachers.

Develop understandings about Aboriginal concepts of time and how this may influence the teaching and learning in your centre/school.

Teacher's toolkit

What I need in my toolkit

Let children know it is OK to make mistakes when they are learning.

Learn about and observe ways the children listen and learn; these strategies may differ from your understanding of how these processes work.

Understand that these children, often ESL students, may need time to listen, watch, imitate, and learn about:

- their teachers
- school/centre routines
- class/school/centre rules
- student and teacher roles.

Learn to recognise those children who may need a longer time to orientate themselves to a new situation/class.

Other children may not want to shame their relatives or peers because they already know their work. These students will wait for their peers to catch up before they can continue with their learning.

Chapter 13: Your 'little bit of something'



Denise: Finding a 'little bit of something' about each other as family members and educators—educators come from both sides, people forget that; to share and learn together and find and create and plan school/centre programs that are caring meaningful, relevant, stimulating, and appropriate: All of this can lead to practical things.

Finding that 'little bit of something', it might seem small but it might be really big; Karen said she now has permission to go back and find out—it could be just something in itself, knowledge builds obligation; someone gives you trust, you are obligated.

This chapter presents the reflections of the families and the Reference Committee members—each person provides a brief statement on the 'little bit of something' they have gained as a result of the project experience and which they will take back and share with their community, e.g. Sharon: *I learned so much it hurt!* Readers are invited at this point to write down their own 'little bit of something' gained as a result of reading the book. A space is provided so that you can capture your thinking right now and not lose it.

My 'little bit of something'

Karen: The one thing we have in common is that we have all shared, all mothers, carers of other younger children that are not our own, that is the hub and that is what we draw strength from; that core doesn't change, the outer part, we use different ways.

Karen B: A much deeper understanding of Aboriginal mind, way of life—that is personal, I will take that back to my classroom as a teacher. I am also a person in my own community, I am part of my family community, school community. I get listened to and heard; I can share that with others; you have helped me to understand.

Kathy: The process used here was excellent; use of visuals great to get talk going, and parents and caregivers involved with educators.

Laurie: It is an invaluable experience to share experiences and beliefs with others. It made me, a Westerner, appreciate anew the idea that, 'there are many roads to Rome' and realise that chopping up learning into chunks that have to be mastered in an order and at a time determined by someone else can get us off the track rather than leading us to the destination. A major concern of Western educators is the attendance patterns of Aboriginal children. If we share common outcomes, we may be able to negotiate more accessible pathways.

Patsy: During my study tour to Reggio Emilia earlier this year I was struck by many similarities between what I saw and heard there and what I have become aware of when working with Indigenous people in various educational settings in the Northern Territory. Many of these observations are reflected in this project and will continue to influence my thinking and work with your children and their families:

- Respect for each person, both adult and child, as thinking, creative learners.
- Active listening—everyone is heard by adults and other children.
- The child is considered a competent individual acting as part of the group with responsibilities to themselves and the group.
- Learning is a social and cultural construct.
- Acknowledgment and respect for the learning which occurs outside the school.
- Many opportunities for making decisions about own learning.
- Learning has a clear purpose and meaning.
- Adults 'lend a little bit of knowledge when necessary to help the child achieve their own purposes.
- Positive relationships are supported between adults/adults, adults/children, children/children in families, communities and schools.

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Maree: Building relationships with students and their families is one of the most important things we can do to enhance a child's education. In my own community I have strong relationships with many of the families, but I will work harder to develop these further. When I work with teachers I will encourage them to have stronger relationships with families, rather than be judgemental about what they see in the child at school. I want to encourage teachers to look at how children express their knowledge in different ways and celebrate. Developing 'seamless' classrooms would be wonderful.



△ Respect all children as thinking, creative learners

Appendix 1: Janette and Tahlia's story

The things everyone will see in the video

Family

Teaching and learning; communication

Connection to land and environment

Happiness

Culture

Passing on information

The things only the family will notice

Who's related to whom

Family relationships known by children

Skin and kinship law

Knowledge about law (e.g. sensitive issues, life issues)

Strong traditions

Understanding family and community obligations

Any other things in the video that are really important about the way children learn in each particular family or community—these might be so taken for granted they aren't noticed any more

Speaking languages

Going out bush

Recognising that language is changing

Babies are important; babies are included in family activities

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Appendix 2: Gloria and Kyle's story

The things everyone will see in the video

Family

Teaching and learning

Communication

Happiness

Culture

Passing on information

Adventurous play—outside

Closeness—brotherly love

Learning from and with each other

Similar interests—dinosaurs

The things only the family will notice

Who's related to whom

Family relationships known by children

Skin and kinship

Any other things in the video that are really important about the way children learn in each particular family or community—these might be so taken for granted they aren't noticed any more

Going out bush

Learning from family members—babies/adults

Responsibilities/obligations of children

Appendix 3: The Milingimbi Mob

The things everyone will see in the video

Learning

Love

Culture

Teaching

Family

Singing

Dancing

Practising song cycle

Land

Music

Strong bond between family

Learning through other family members

Grandmothers as teachers

Behaviour

Respect

Joking—sense of humour, fun

Laughter

Passing on of traditions

The things only the family will notice

Land—Yolngu kids interacted more with Yolngu teachers really engaged in and interested in the activity

Yolngu language is what they know as compared with 'blossom book'

Teaching grammar and sentence structure, not just words and sounds

Classroom—balanda teacher—balanda children interacted more than Yolngu kids; teacher on chair, not with kids

Land is a special place

Family/country/dance

Auntie explaining significance of that country/clan group to Miranda 9ed and just do it

Language and stories

Dances

Relationship to land

Reading/literacy = looking for signs, cycles, symbols

Reading the land

Fulfilling social and cultural obligations

Miranda is important—community, family, culture, adulthood (passing on knowledge), school

Respect

Appendix 4: Sharon and Kori-Ann's story

The things everyone will see in the video

Fun

Mixing with other Aboriginal children

Outdoor play—park

Enjoying Kindy

Health and hygiene—healthy ears

Eating—sharing meals and conversations

The things only the family will notice

Playing with family at Kindy

Very wary—being Aboriginal doesn't mean we know everything about Aboriginal culture

Any other things in the video that are really important about the way children learn in each particular family or community—these might be so taken for granted they aren't noticed any more

Family should look after family (unwritten obligation)

Prefers to learn with cousins/family

Aboriginal families are relaxed at home—easier place for children to learn

Appendix 5: Vicky and Gregory's story

The things everyone will see in the video

Learning

Singing

Mixing with other cultures

Performer

Sense of humour

Fun

Inquisitive and curious

Dancing

Music

Creative

Imitating dance—Uncle

Eager to learn

The things only the family will notice

Uncle is a mechanic and Gregory is interested in cars

Strong bond between Gregory and uncles

Auntie and uncles are patient with Gregory

Close relationship with cousin—learned play together

Any other things in the video that are really important about the way children learn in each particular family or community—these might be so taken for granted they aren't noticed any more

Enjoys working one-to-one

Enjoys repetition

Family spends a lot of time with Gregory—doing interesting things with him

Patience

Appendix 6: Narjwa and Shannon's story

The things everyone will see in the video

Family

Music—country music

Enjoys painting—talked about what he had painted

Sharing—drink

Curious

Happy

Riding bikes

Interested in tools;

Interested in lawn-mowing with Grandpa

Confident

Good coordination—riding bike at three years

The things only the family will notice

Only grandson, Pop spoils him

More relaxed learning at home

Close relationships with cousins

Learning from cousins

Shares with all cousins

Any other things in the video that are really important about the way children learn in each particular family or community—these might be so taken for granted they aren't noticed any more:

Use Language words every day

Family know their connection to their country through their language

Appendix 7: Preschool Profile

Profile of print literacy awareness and understanding

		With adult/peer support and minimal child input (MODELLED)	Jointly undertaken by child and adult/peer (SHARED)	Child takes leadership and/or works independently (INDEPENDENT)
Shows awareness of the print literacy they see in their home	In child's first language In English			
Shows awareness of the print literacy they see in their community	In child's first language In English			
Shows awareness that printed texts vary according to purpose	In child's first language In English			
Shows understanding of the link between experience, oral language and written text	In child's first language In English			
Understands that texts are 'read' from left to right and from top to bottom of the lines	In child's first language In English			
Can recognise own printed English/Skin/nick name	In child's first language In English			
Can 'write' some letters of own English/Skin/nick name	In child's first language In English			

Profile of numeracy awareness and understanding

		With adult/peer support and minimal child input (MODELLED)	Jointly undertaken by child and adult/peer (SHARED)	Child takes leadership and/or works independently (INDEPENDENT)
Demonstrates an understanding of time	In child's first language In English			
Demonstrates an understanding of measurement	In child's first language In English			
Demonstrates an understanding of number	In child's first language In English			
Recognises and uses symbols appropriately	In child's first language In English			
Applies understanding of spatial awareness in a number of contexts	In child's first language In English			
Predicts on the basis of experience	In child's first language In English			
Can group things together	In child's first language In English			

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Williams-Kennedy, D. (2000) *I draw and acknowledge my references from my experience as an Aboriginal and Islander person within a large extended family. I am also a mother, a teacher, and a learner. I have been a friend and educational advocate for many children and their families, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. These places, people and experiences have helped me care and learn more about myself, my identity, my culture, and the importance of both Aboriginal and Western education for all children. These experiences and this knowledge have become part of the library in my head. It has been this knowledge that has enabled me to contribute to and co-author this book.*

Parents of Indigenous children want their children to have access to the same educational opportunities as other Australian children. At the same time, it is important to recognise the culture intrinsic to the context in which Indigenous children grow up.

Building Bridges — Literacy development in young Indigenous children builds the bridge between what Indigenous parents and their communities see as important about what their young children know and are able to do, and the teaching and learning process currently followed in preschools.

The Australian Early Childhood Association recognises the importance of this relationship in bringing together relevant and respectful learning processes and teaching methods. *Building Bridges* will set the pace for better educational learning outcomes for young Indigenous children and help to make a better future for us all.



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